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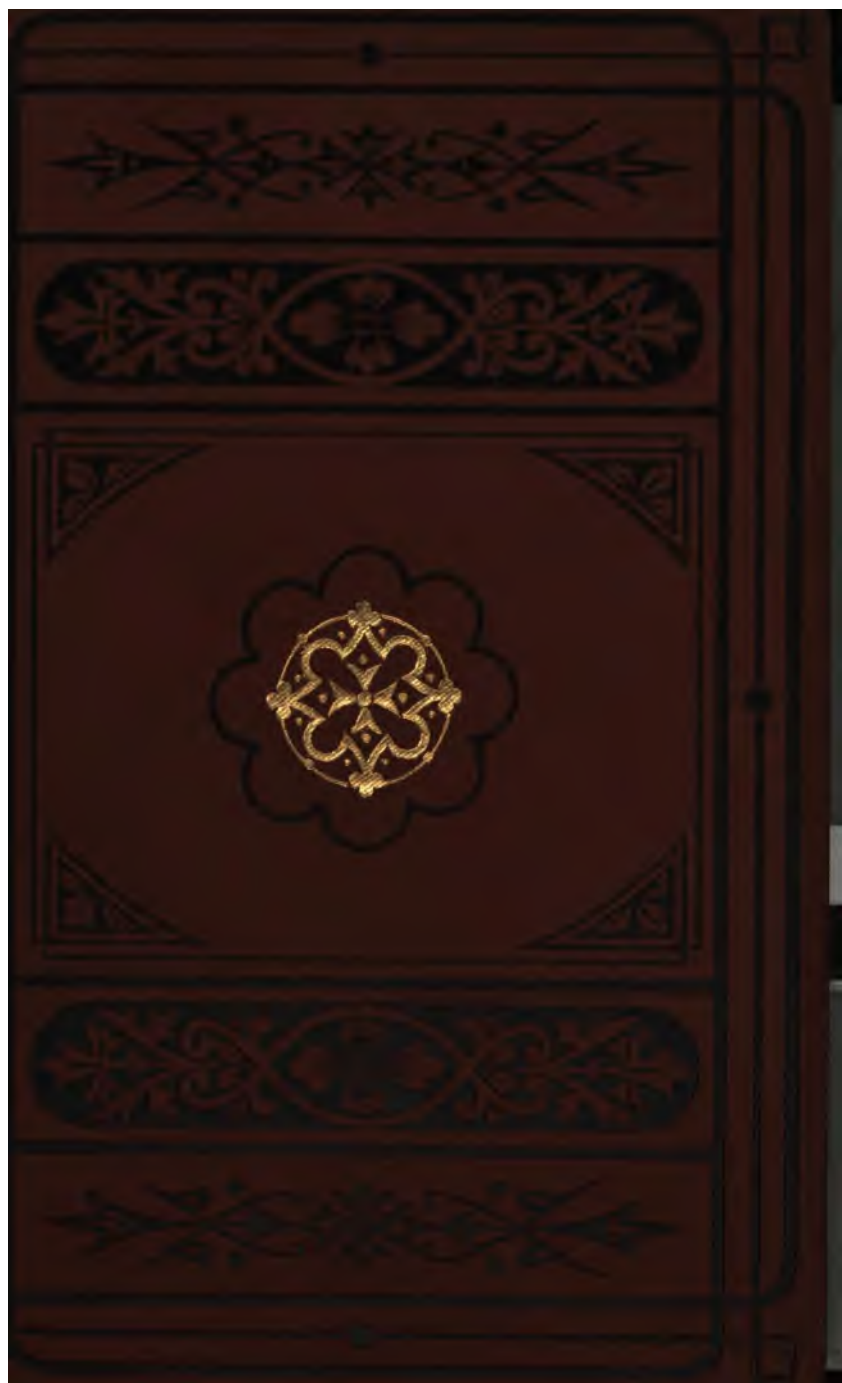
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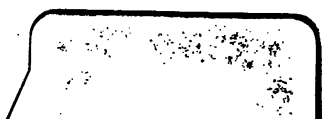
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DORA:

A LIFE STORY,

BY

S. L. BRAND.



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DORA: A LIFE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

MY HOME.



FMUST begin by describing my home—the house in which I was reared, and where the saddest part of my life was spent.

It was called “The Limes,” and was situated in the middle of the pretty but quiet little village of Trenthaven, in one of the Midland Counties.

We had a splendid avenue of limes (whence the name), which swept from the little rustic-looking lodge at the entrance

of the grounds, up to the white stone steps leading into the hall. There was a flower garden and fountain on one side of the house, and a charming croquet ground and shrubbery in the front, below which the river Trente went gliding and shimmering along, looking so cool and inviting on this hot summer day, on which I commence my story. The house was of white stone, and had a verandah running round the lower part of it, now filled with gay plants, which Reuben, the old gardener, had placed there—"Jest to plaze the young mistress," or "Mees Dora," as he used to call me.

I was an only daughter, my elder brother, Edmund, was away at Cambridge, studying for the Church, and Willie (a younger brother), was at present at home with his tutor—Mr. Claremont—of whom I shall speak presently.

I was left motherless at the early age of six, and was brought up amongst servants, with a cousin four years older for my only companion.

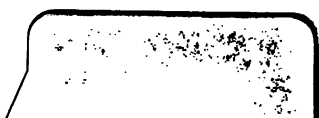
We both had the same masters and the same governess, but Bella, being so much my senior, soon became much more advanced in her different accomplishments, and so it was that I generally found myself in the background.

My father always used to expect us to play and sing to him of an evening, and Bella generally played first, so that my little attempts came in too late to be appreciated, for my father would be tired after hearing one or two pieces from either of us.

Bella was an orphan, her father was my father's favourite brother. He had been killed by a fall from his horse, and his wife, unable to bear up against the dread-



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with my mother from the time of Willie's birth, used to say, "Miss Dora will grow up just like her mamma;" and I used to listen with a feeling of awe not unmixed with delight, as the garrulous old woman would sit hours together, telling me of the beautiful places she had visited with mamma and my father in my infancy, and how my mother would snatch me up in her arms, and weeping over me, pray that my father would not grow cold towards her little Dora, but love his little girl always. My father grieved deeply at my mother's death, and often in the long summer evenings he would take me through the village to the little ivy-covered church, and pause not until he came to a green grave marked by a simple cross of white marble, bearing simply the inscription—

*"Ellen, Wife of Sir Wilfred Temley,
Aged 26 years."*

Then, after staying a short time, he would walk moodily home, and perhaps pet me a little, kiss me, and carry me up to my nurse, saying it was his little girl's bed time.

That was my earliest remembrance ; as I grew older, he left off petting me, and I grew half afraid of the tall, handsome man, who walked about with eyes bent on the ground, and who so seldom spoke to me. " Ah, Miss Dora," nurse would say, " your father has some trouble which the likes o' me will never find out." Then I would question her about my mother's family, but she would instantly purse up her mouth, and tell me to go and play, or talk to Miss Bella; so that it was not until years afterwards that I got to know anything about the trouble that weighed so on my poor unhappy parent.

I was younger than either of my

brothers. Edmund was four years older than I at the time of my story. He went to Cambridge at nineteen, and we were all expecting him home for the "long," on this my eighteenth birthday. Willie was not quite two years older than I, and it was to him I always carried my troubles and my little vexations when a child, for in him I always found a ready listener, a comforter, and model of what a brother should be to a young sister.





CHAPTER II.

WHAT I SAW AT MIDNIGHT.

ALATE dull autumn evening was closing in upon the valley of the Trente, and the stream, like a sullied mirror, gloomily reflected the dark and lowering sky, and the banks leaned over here and there, as if they were rather curious to see their darkening outlines reflected in the water. So it seemed to me as I stood by the river that dreadful night, for I was most miserable. I had no mother to guide me, an unsympathizing father, and I felt as if I should like to lie down in the water looking so cool and still before me. I, who was "the

beauty of my county,"—so I was told—was pining for the love of Alfred Claremont, my brother's tutor.

There, now I have confessed my secret, but only in these pages, whereon his eyes will never look. He was a clergyman's son, but his father had been too poor to complete that education which was to have enabled Alfred to follow the same profession—and so it was that my father heard of him, and secured his services as tutor to my brother Willie. Alfred Claremont was very handsome, twenty-seven years of age, tall, with curling brown hair, and blue eyes, and a long, drooping moustache, and his hands were white and delicate as a girl's. In my eyes he was perfect.

"Dora, Dora!" I heard Bella calling; so I hastened up the bank and over the lawn to where she was standing in the open window, or glass door leading into

the drawing-room under the verandah. I stopped to look at the pleasant scene within. Bella, now that she had seen me leave the river and return towards the house, had gone to the piano, and was sitting dreamily running her fingers over the keys. How beautiful she looked in her pale blue evening dress, her shoulders almost hidden by the wealth of golden curls which fell almost to her waist. Mr. Claremont seemed to think so too, for he was seated on a low ottoman by her side, looking at her very intently while idly turning over the leaves of her music.

“Dora, come and have a game of chess,” cried Willie, and I sat down and began to play in a mechanical kind of way, but did not feel any interest in the game, so that Willie had it all his own way, and was delighted at his conquest, for chess was a game I was particularly fond of, and it

usually happened that I was the winner. After a little while, however, Willie grew tired of his continued success, and threw himself on to a lounge and began to read.

“Sing once more, please, Miss Bella,” I heard Alfred Claremont say ; but Bella was tired or pretended to be so, for, springing up hastily, she shut to the piano with a bang, saying, “No, I shall sing no more to-night ;” and crossing the room, she came over to where I was seated.

My father was just about retiring for the night, and with Bella’s arm within mine, we said “good night,” and went up stairs to our own separate rooms.

I couldn’t go to sleep, for I felt so restless, and dreaded being left alone with my thoughts in the silent night. This was quite unusual for me, for I was generally a good sleeper ; but that night I could not sleep. The stillness and loneliness of the

house oppressed me. I opened my window and leaned forward to look on the garden below, but presently I was astonished to see at the further end of the verandah, the reflection of a light shining through some uncurtained window, on the ground below.

As I looked at this illuminated spot, some dark object crossed it rapidly, blotting out the light for a moment.

This circumstance being so unusual alarmed me, and quietly closing my window, I put on my dressing-gown, lighted my candle, and went out of my room into the corridor. Our house had a handsome, wide staircase, and long corridor, on to which on either side opened the bedrooms and dressing-rooms.

Along through the corridor I passed, my uncovered feet making no sound, mentally determining to go on now, and to see where the light proceeded from. I stood

still and listened—listened I know not for what—listened, hoping for some sound to break the stillness of the night.

I could hear the clock ticking in the hall below, but beyond that, nothing—not a sound, not a whisper, throughout the house.

I ran to a window on the landing, on the same side of the house as my own, and still the light was there, burning steadily on.

From the position of it, I knew it could proceed from only one room, and that was my father's study. I trembled at I knew not what, but still I never hesitated in my way down stairs, and went noiselessly on, until I came to the morning-room, "the blue room," as we often called it. Through that I passed, for it opened into the study. All was silent in the blue room, and I could see a faint streak of light through the half closed study door, and something

compelled me to go on. So I noiselessly, tremblingly advanced towards the light.

I followed the light with my eyes, down the wall, from the gilded pictures to the carpet on the floor, and crept nearer to the door, but still without a sound breaking the oppressive stillness.

I pushed the door a little wider, and looked into the room. Shall I ever forget the sight that met my terrified gaze? A man was lying on his back on the floor, and my father was bending over him!

A horrible gash, from which the blood was flowing on to the ground, was across the dead man's throat—for I felt sure he was dead.

I dared not speak, so horrified was I at the sight before me, but I stood a silent spectator of the terrible scene being enacted in the room before me. My father raised the dead man's head and felt his

heart; then seeing he moved not, he looked wildly round—so haggard, not at all like the father of a few hours before—but still he did not look towards the half-open door.

I stood as if nailed to the spot, paralyzed at the scene before me. Presently I saw my father open the window, and raise the dead man on his shoulders, and take him out into the night.

I followed to the window, and heard my father going down towards the river with his dreadful burden. I then turned to look at the spot where the dead man had lain, and to my horror saw a pool of blood, and a handkerchief lying near.

I stooped, and mechanically picked it up, and then fled to my room—anywhere out of that dreadful study—I threw myself, half-mad with terrifying thoughts on to my bed—and then I remember no more.



CHAPTER III.

"THE BLOOD-STAIN ON THE CARPET."



I MUST have fainted, for the dawn was just creeping in when I opened my eyes; and I tried to think what had happened to me. Suddenly the dreadful scene in the study presented itself before my eyes, and I trembled with agony as I recalled the night's horrors to my mind. And then I remembered the handkerchief I had picked up in my terror at seeing blood upon the carpet. It was a very fine cambric handkerchief, and had two

letters embroidered in one corner, "*S. P.*" but that was all. Could it have belonged to the murdered man? for I felt he had been murdered; and as I thought, the cry broke from me "Would to God I had died before that day." I dreaded the light of the morning, and more than all, the idea of meeting my father; for how could I meet him, knowing what I did? I then thought of my brothers, Edmund, so good and true, at Cambridge, and Willie, asleep now, little dreaming of the crime which had been committed a few hours before.

I lay in the same bewildered state, when our maid (who divided her services between Bella and me) knocked at my bedroom door and asked me if I knew how late it was? Then I got up and began to dress myself, in a dream as it were.

I dreaded meeting my father, fearing my

knowledge of the previous night's tragedy would betray me, in my looks or actions. I knew not which course to take ; my brain was in a whirl, and my mind oblivious to everything but the dreadful scene of the past night.

Go down, however, to breakfast, I must, for my staying away might cause inquiry or suspicion.

I determined not to mention what I had seen to anyone, but wait until my father or someone else should speak ; I never would be the one to accuse my own father of murder, for, despite his coldness, I still loved him as a parent is seldom loved by a child ; so with a white face, and heavy heart, I went down to the breakfast room.

I was late I found, for out on the lawn was Bella, in her long fluttering robes and ribbons, a tiny, sailor's hat on her head, and her hair looking like burnished gold in

the sunlight. She was talking animatedly to Willie and Mr. Claremont. They did not see me, and as I sat down to the deserted breakfast table, I felt as if all the life had left me, and from my home all happiness for ever gone.

I finished my pretence at breakfast, for I could not swallow anything, and was going towards the study, which seemed to possess a kind of fascination for me, when Thomas, the butler, stopped me by saying, "Excuse me, Miss Dora, but Sir Wilfred begged not to be disturbed this morning."

I then knew that he was shut up in that dreadful room, I wandered into our small conservatory, and was standing, lost in thought—thinking over my dreadful secret, for a secret I felt it must be—when I heard steps approaching, and Mr. Claremont entered alone.

"Good morning, Miss Temley," said he,

looking, I thought, so handsome and winning. "I come," he went on, "with a message from your brother, asking you to join us for a row in the boat this lovely morning—The river looks charming!"

"Give my love to Willie, and tell him I don't feel quite well this morning, and ask him to take my cousin instead of me."

He went away, looking not quite satisfied, but I saw him a few minutes later join Willie and Bella on the lawn, and they all went down to the boat-house together.

I wandered about all the morning, not knowing what to do, and felt relieved when luncheon passed and I did not see my father.

Bella and Willie were anxious to know if he were ill, for they could not understand his secluding himself all day; it was so unusual for him to keep indoors when the weather was fine.

I listened to their remarks, and thought how I alone knew why he kept his study door closed against us all.

Thomas had taken him some luncheon, but it was returned untouched; and he said that his master would join the young people at dinner.

I spent the afternoon as I had the morning, in wandering aimlessly about, and when Bella came to me whilst I was dressing and asked "What was the matter with Dory?" I had no answer ready for her, and so told her my head ached badly.

How I wished the dinner hour over, and that my first meeting with my father was past.

My love for Alfred Claremont, in the great trouble that had come so suddenly upon me, seemed almost to have been forgotten, to have stagnated, or when it did occur to me, it was only with the thought

that such love as his could never be mine now, for how could I expect him to marry a murderer's daughter ?

Seven was our dinner hour. Nervously I watched the fingers moving slowly round the little clock face on the drawing-room mantelpiece, for I knew that with "seven" would come my father. I heard him go upstairs to dress at a quarter-past six, so I thought I should have time to go and give one look at that dreadful room before the dinner bell rung.

I passed quietly out of the drawing-room, through the blue room, and into the study. But a cold chill seemed to come over me as I entered the room, now almost dark, for the lamp was turned down, and everything was wrapped in gloom.

I walked to the window, but suddenly remembered the blood I had seen on the floor in the night.

I drew my dress tightly round me, and looked on the carpet, but could see nothing unusual; so I began to think it was only my excited imagination of the night before. Thus thinking, I walked round to the other side of the room, and there I saw a great patch of wet ink, newly laid down, and which entirely covered the place where I now felt sure I had seen blood.

I turned faint, for I knew why my father had poured the ink there. It was to avoid suspicion and questioning; and on the carpet now lay the inkstand, as if accidentally upset. As these thoughts passed through my mind, I almost fell; the faintness had come over me again; but by a great effort I recovered myself, and went out from the sickening atmosphere of the study, carefully closing the door after me. When I reached the dining-room my father was not there, and as the bell rang

for the last time, I heard him coming slowly down the stairs.

I took my usual place opposite to him, but dared not look that way. Willie rallied me on looking so "glum," and wondered what made "Dot" look so white.

Ah ! poor boy, if he could have looked into my heart, and seen what was passing there, he would not have been surprised at my miserable appearance.

I ventured to steal several glances at my father during dinner, but beyond his looking paler than usual, and seeming rather irritable at times, I should not have noticed anything different in his usual conduct towards us.

Dinner over, he rose and went back to his study ; and I heard him shut and lock the door ; and feeling bowed down with my terrible secret, I went up to my room, and

prayed long and earnestly for "strength to do that which was right."

In about an hour Bella came to me, and seeing me lying still on my bed, thought I must be asleep, so she quietly closed the door after her; and in a short time afterwards, I heard her at the piano.

I lay still some time longer, but at last I could not bear the solitude of my room, so I went down stairs again.

As soon as Bella caught sight of me, she ran forward, and kissed me affectionately, and asked if I were ill.

I told her my head was bad (which was true enough), that was all; and Willie instantly sprang off the lounge he had been appropriating, and insisted upon petting "Dot" for the rest of the evening in his boyish fashion.

Mr. Claremont was very kind also, in his grave, affectionate manner, and he fetched

a folio of drawings from his room—drawings and pencil sketches of places of interest in the neighbourhood. He continued to sit by my side for the rest of the evening, pointing out the different features in his drawings, and which he thought would be likely to interest me. How happy I should have been to have had him sit by me, paying me such delicate little attentions, a few days ago ; but now I could do nothing and think of nothing but my terrible secret.

Oh ! for some friend in whose ear I could pour my woes—but no, there was no one I dared speak to on that subject ; I must hide it in my heart alone, and if need be, carry it with me untold to the grave.

I was roused from my gloomy thoughts by Bella asking me if I should like to have a pic-nic in the woods adjoining the park, before the lovely autumn weather was over.

“You know,” said Willie, “Bella and you could ride, and Mr. Claremont and I would walk by your side; and we could send luncheon on by Thomas.”

“What do you say to that Dot? Let us go to-morrow.”

Seeing how they all wished to have it so, I could not do less than agree to the proposal. So it was arranged that we should have it on the morrow. After talking a little while longer, I said “good night,” and retired, meaning to seek that rest, of which I stood so much in need.





CHAPTER IV.

THE PIC-NIC.

THE following morning dawned bright and warm for so late in the autumn; and I lay for some time after I awoke in a dull kind of stupor, before I could rouse myself sufficiently to get up and dress.

Willie was out early; I could hear his dear voice throwing back gay sallies to his tutor, as they went down the drive, towards the lane through the village. Both were riding, and a very handsome pair of young fellows they looked, each with the glow of health upon his cheek.

Bella came into my room shortly afterwards, and we went down stairs together ; no one else was there.

“ What makes you so pale, Dora ? ” asked Bella, “ you look so pale and wan, dear, what is it ? ”

I couldn't tell her my trouble, so putting her off with some slight excuse, I went to meet Willie, whom I saw in the distance.

“ A glorious day for the pic-nic, Dot,” cried he ; “ but how pale you look !—Is'nt she, Mr. Claremont ? ”

I turned away, and went into the house, the others following—and I took my place at the breakfast table.

After the meal was over, our ponies were brought round, and we set out for our ride through the park to the woods. How I should have enjoyed it a week ago ; but now I could not enjoy anything. The fresh morning air played on my cheeks as

we cantered along, and the Hall looked so noble in the bright morning sunshine. But I must explain. Our way lay in front of Trentham Hall, the seat of the Duke of Sutherland. We were tenants of his, and were privileged to go at will through the Hall grounds, park, and in fact over all the estate. It was a noble park, and lay in front of the Hall. On one side was a lake, and there in the winter we used to make up our skating parties—and merry times have we had, often skating by torchlight.

So my thoughts rambled on, as we went slowly along on that bright Autumn morning ; and as I looked around me, everything seemed so fresh and fair, that for a moment my trouble seemed raised by some invisible hand, and I felt almost buoyant ; but it was only for a moment. I dreaded meeting anyone, fearing to hear that the body was found ; for in a small village like

Trenthaven, news—and especially “bad” news, spreads fast. However, we soon arrived at the spot decided upon for our luncheon to be spread, and saw Thomas busily unpacking a huge hamper, and proceeding to get everything in readiness for us upon our return from the ramble Bella and Willie had set their hearts upon. Our ponies were first attended to, and we divided into two parties—Bella and Willie going first, and myself and Mr. Claremont following more leisurely, up the hill to the monument of the late Duke of Trenthaven. When we arrived at the top of the hill, I was obliged to sit down and rest. Bella and Willie were nowhere to be seen.

“They must have gone down to the springs,” said Mr. Claremont.

So, after waiting what seemed to me a very long time, I proposed that Mr. Claremont should go and join them. He did

not at first agree to my proposal, but sat down on a fallen tree, and we soon began an interesting conversation. At any other time I should have enjoyed hearing him talk, for he had rare conversational powers, and could converse well upon most subjects ; and he was always so modest, and gentle in his manners, that he had become a favourite with us all.

That morning he talked upon several subjects—botany among the rest, but I was sick at heart, and weighed down with trouble ; and after a short time he went in search of Bella and Willie.

My seat was on a mossy bank, and as I sat listening to the birds carolling so sweetly, I thought of the change which had come over me in the short space of two days—“ Ah,” thought I—“ a few hours ago my heart was as light as that bird’s, singing so merrily on the opposite tree. Now

I am weighed down to the earth with a terrible secret, which I must not divulge to anyone ; but must bear my burden alone."

How I wished then, that I was laid beside my mother in her quiet grave—but this is a beautiful world I thought as I gazed on the broad park grounds, and noble trees—now ripe with the flush of autumn upon them—and just then the sun sent out a glorious gleam, from under a copper cloud, and seeming to turn the fading foliage to gold—but presently I heard Bella and Willie approaching, and my reverie was broken in upon.

" Why didn't you come with us, Dot ?" asked Willie,—“ We have had a glorious time of it. First we went to the springs, and then through the park to the other end—but where is Mr. Claremont ?” he broke off suddenly to ask, his eyes wandering round in search of him.

"He left me an hour ago, to look for you," I answered.

"Where can he be?" said Bella.

Our anxieties were soon relieved, by his making his appearance in the distance, coming along hurriedly, as if something had disturbed him. Willie went to meet his tutor, and I could see they were conversing earnestly upon some subject, which evidently excited them both.

I at once thought of my secret, and felt sure it was something connected with it, that they were talking about so earnestly, and I tried to appear unconcerned when they came up to where Bella and I were seated.

"We thought we had lost you Mr. Claremont," cried Bella. "Where have you been hiding yourself so long?"

"Not hiding at all," he made reply, "but I walked on to the lodge, at the

entrance to the park ; and was detained by Mrs. Monkton—who lives there you know,—and she kept me talking about a dreadful discovery that has been made this morning.”

“ She says that the dead body of a man has been found a little way up the river, and it had drifted among some rushes growing on the bank ; and the most startling part of the tale is—that he must have been murdered, and then thrown into the river. That is what the men say, who got the body out ; and also that he is not an Englishman—but a foreigner—Nothing has at present been found that would help to identify the poor fellow. But, good heavens ! Miss Temley—What is the matter ? ”

I heard no more, for I had fainted, a horrible feeling came over me, and I thought all would now be discovered.

It proved too much for me, and uncon-

sciousness came to my relief. They sprinkled my face with water, and Willie poured a little sherry through my cold lips—and presently I recovered consciousness.

“Are you better,” asked Willie, “It was that story that frightened you Dot—but now let us go and have some luncheon, and forget all about that horrible tale.”

“Lean on me,” said Bella, and together we walked to the place where Thomas stood, impatiently waiting for us.

“This is one of the most beautiful spots in the park,” said Willie. But I could no longer enjoy the lovely scenery—I longed—and yet dreaded to know more of the discovery of the dead body, and I determined if I could, to go out unperceived after dinner that night, and walk up to the lodge, and make further inquiries myself.

Luncheon over—we began to think of returning ; Thomas was already putting away

plates and glasses, and we decided to go home round by Elmstone, another little village, and not very far from Trenthaven.

We led very secluded lives in our quiet home, and seldom had any visitors—except the old Vicar and his daughters. They sometimes called to see us, for the Vicarage was but a short distance from our house.

Since our mother died, my father had given up going into society ; and now that our governess had left us, we had no one to chaperon us ; so that we seldom went out any distance from our own home.

My father saw few persons, he would go for a ride in the early part of the day, and then pass the remainder of his time in his study, or among his plants. He was about fifty years old, but looked younger. His hair not as yet streaked with grey—but still of a rich brown, like Edmund's.

We reached home just as the dressing

bell began to ring, and as I had not seen my father all that day, I wondered whether he would be at dinner, and if he had heard of the finding of that body.

Bella and I went up together to dress, and as I was turning away to go into my room she said—"How strange it is, uncle has not been out of his study to-day—Is anything the matter with him, Dora?"

"Wait until I'm dressed, and then I'll go and see," I answered; but again I felt my cheeks turning pale, so I hurried into my room, leaving Bella standing outside on the landing opposite my door.

My father appeared at dinner! He did not speak unless questioned, but this the others did not notice, for he was always very reserved; and I hoped that the afternoon's conversation in the park, would not be repeated; but I was doomed to be disappointed—for Willie—after looking at his

plate very seriously for a minute, as if thinking of something serious, said, "By the way, pa—have you heard the story that is going about in the village?"

My father gave one startled look round, like a hunted animal—and turning a shade paler, said—"No, my boy. What is the story?"

Willie then repeated all that Mrs. Monkton had told Mr. Claremont in the afternoon, but without raising his eyes as he did so.

My father heard him through to the end, but I dared not look that way. "Where is the—the—" (he hesitated before saying) "the body?" asked my father, without looking at anyone.

"The men took it to the lodge, I think," answered Willie, "but I don't remember quite all that was said, for Dot, there, went off in a faint while Mr.

Claremont was telling us about it in the park."

At that my father turned and looked at me; but O! such a look, as if he would read my very inmost soul.

He then rose from the table, and tottered rather than walked to the door; a minute later we heard the study door shut, and the key turned in the lock; of late he generally locked himself in, to prevent our intruding upon him.

"I can't make the governor out," said Willie; "He's hardly tasted dinner; I'm completely puzzled."

"Yes," Mr. Claremont made reply; I, too, am puzzled; something is wrong with him, I feel sure." And so saying, he rose from his chair to open the door for Bella and I to pass through on our way to the drawing-room. I sat patiently waiting until Bella was seated at the piano, and

Willie had got an interesting book, before going upstairs to prepare for my walk to the lodge, and then I made my escape without attracting notice.

The anxiety to know more would not be quieted within me. I ran out through a little side door, and down the drive, through the quiet village, to the lodge at the entrance of the park; and did not meet anyone who recognized me as "Miss Temley, of The Limes." I knocked at the door, which was soon opened by Mrs. Monkton, herself. She was a very old woman, and a great favourite of mine.

"Mercy on us!" she cried when she saw who her visitor was; "and have you come all the way yourself, my bonnie young lady?"

"It is only a few minutes' walk," I said, "and the night is very bright; but let me come in and warm my hands a little."

The good old soul hastened to draw her most comfortable chair near the fire, and seating herself opposite to me, commenced asking how bonnie Master Willie was ; and finally finished her enquiries by looking at me, and saying, " You look pale, Miss Dora, are ye weel ?"

I told her I suffered frequently with pain in my head, and I might have added in my heart also. Mrs. Monkton had known me from a child, and she always enjoyed the opportunity of having a talk with me. So I had not long to wait before she began asking me if I had heard of the discovery that had been made that morning.

" Yes," I said, " I have heard all about it." And I then inquired where the body of the murdered man had been found.

" He was a'sticking in the rushes a little way down the river," she answered—" and my old man helped to get him out," she

went on to say; "and he and two other men have taken him to the lodge at the other end of the park."

"I am thankful to think they didn't bring him here, for they tell me, Miss Dora, that his throat is all cut, and that he'd a rale diamond ring on one of his fingers.—But laws, Miss Dory, how white you are! Is the fire too hot for you, lassie?"

"No," I said, "It is not the fire," and I then asked her if her husband had ever seen the murdered man before.

"No," answered she, "They tell me he's a foreigner—and he has some lace on his wrists, and beautiful white hands. Puir mon, how true is the blessed book—which says—'In the midst of life, we are in death.' I wonder if he's left any one to weep for him?"

After sitting some little time longer, I

rose to go, and said—"Now I must say good night, Nancy"—but she would insist upon toddling by my side through the village, to the gate leading into the drive.

I had not been missed, I found—Oh ! how my heart yearned for a word of comfort from some one—and how I longed to know the meaning of my father's conduct on that dreadful night, and the motive for so terrible a deed—but my longing was not to be satisfied then, not until months of suffering had passed over me. I went straight to bed, and it was long ere sleep visited my weary eyelids ; and then only to be haunted by dreadful visions, and terrible night-mares.





CHAPTER V.

"THE MEETING IN THE SHRUBBERY."

THE next morning the sun was shining brightly into my bedroom when I awoke, and as I dressed, I came to the determination to see my father, and to ask for an explanation of what I saw on that dreadful night the first opportunity that offered, I felt there was a mystery somewhere. Who was the man, and what was his name; and what was he doing in the study at that hour? I often asked myself these questions, but could find no way of answering them.

"A foreign gentleman," Mrs. Monkton

had said, but I had never seen any stranger about the house or grounds. Strangers were of rare occurrence with us—and I felt certain I should have heard had there been anyone about, with whom we were not acquainted.

The more I thought, the more bewildered I became.

It was early when I entered the morning room, Bella was not yet down, but I saw Mr. Claremont out in the garden ; and I went to him—for I longed for some companion—for some one to talk to, to keep my mind from dwelling on the one subject, for at times I thought I must go mad.

“ Good morning, Miss Temley,” said Mr. Claremont, “ I am admiring the different autumnal tints in those trees opposite. At the edge of the park, yonder.”

I turned to look at the spot indicated, but did not speak. He turned to me and

said, "Are you quite well? you look tired and pale this morning, my dear Miss Temley."

"I did not have a good night's rest," I answered. "I lay thinking and thinking till day-break."

"Not sad thoughts, I hope. Would that I knew what they were about, then I might help you perhaps."

"No," I said, "you could not help me; there is only one that could, and I dare not ask him."

He looked at me in a wondering sort of way, as if he would fathom my meaning—but withal so handsome and winning in the bright, golden sunlight.

"Is that a rose?" I asked, wishing to change the conversation; "There, close to that bush," I said, pointing to the spot.

He turned to look, and presently returned, carrying the late autumn rose very

carefully. He gave it to me, and I fastened it—glistening with dew—in my belt. He watched me, with a new, glad light shining in his eyes, with a look he had never bestowed upon me before. I knew then he loved me, and could feel my cheeks crimsoning at the thought, and still blushing, I turned to go into the house, leaving him to finish his walk alone.

At breakfast (a meal my father never partook of with us), Mr. Claremont said, “I hear they have removed the body of the murdered man to Trenthaven Inn, there to await the inquest.”

“It is a most mysterious affair,” said Willie, “all the village is talking about it.”

“Has any discovery been made?” I strove to ask.

“No; I can’t hear of anyone who knew the poor fellow, or who has seen him before, and that is one of the most mys-

terious parts of it," answered my brother. "He's evidently a gentleman," he went on to say; "but who's to say who he is, or where he came from, without a letter or any clue towards discovering his name, or anything about him?"

No one answered these questions; so after breakfast I put on my hat, thinking I would go for a walk in the park.

I had made a tour through the gardens, and turned into the shrubbery. Suddenly, when I was about half way through, I came face to face with my father.

"Dora," he said, with startling abruptness, "where are you going?"

"For a walk in the park," I answered; "Do you want me, papa?"

"Yes," said he, "come into the study with me."

I followed tremblingly, dreading something else was going to happen. He led

the way through the blue room into the study, and then he carefully closed the door after us.

I thought I was going to faint, I felt so sick and ill ; but I forgot my own weakness in listening to what my father had to say to me.

“Dora,” said he, “Willie’s twenty-first birthday is on Christmas Eve, as you know, and now it is nearly November ; so I think of sending for your Aunt Carrie, and giving a small party on Christmas Eve to celebrate the event in a quiet way among ourselves.”

“What do you think of it?”

I was too surprised to speak at once, I wanted someone to whom I could open my mind, and who could advise me what to do.

My father seemed disappointed, I thought, at my not appearing to be more

delighted at the prospect of a party, but my tongue refused to speak for some moments.

“What is the matter, my child?” he asked kindly.

I could not tell him what was passing in my thoughts, for how could I be the first to accuse him of “murder.” I shudder as I write the word, but a day of reckoning was coming which none of us could foresee; and as a “thief in the night” it came.

At last I found speech to answer my father, and saying, “A party would be nice, and we shall all be pleased to have aunt Carrie come and stay with us,” I rose from my seat, and hurried out of the room, for I could bear no more.





CHAPTER VI.

WILLIE'S BIRTHDAY.



HE days glided on into weeks, and it now wanted only three days to Christmas Eve—Willie's birthday.

Time had brought no explanation of the mystery which still shrouded the proceedings of that never-to-be-forgotten night. Much as I had loved my father before, I now began to shrink from him with the greatest abhorrence, and to think that no argument of his would ever justify the act—whatever he might urge.

He killed him I felt sure, killed him in

the midst of his sins. In the midst of his sins he had died, and no time had been allowed him for repentance. He had sent an undying soul before its Maker, without warning, and without time for repentance.

These thoughts were for ever recurring to me, and I could not rid myself of them. No wonder my cheek grew pale, and my eyes saddened ; but I resolved that no one, unless it was my father, should know the cause of my trouble, and several times I thought that he recognised the change in me, and seemed cowed when in my presence.

“How long, how long could this last ?” I often asked myself, and now this, my first party was drawing near, I wondered how many girls there were in the world who looked on their first party as I did then upon mine.

I dreaded it ; the gay dresses, the house

upset with so many people hurrying about, and Aunt Carrie giving so many orders at once, that poor Thomas was quite bewildered.

Reuben also, was at his wit's end, to find flowers sufficient to decorate the house and tables with, as he seemed to think they should be decorated on "Master Willie's birthday," for he prided himself on the cultivation of his flowers, and often used to say that the Hall flowers were not to be compared with those of his own raising. The vain old man! but his heart was in the right place.

Anxiety by day and wakefulness by night will soon tell their own tale, and when I got up to dress, on the morning of Christmas Eve, I felt as if my strength would not carry me through the day.

Bella came into my room as I was finishing my morning toilet, and said, "Come,

Dora, how late you are, the breakfast bell rung a quarter of an hour ago."

"Did it?" I asked wearily; "don't wait for me, dear, but tell Simpson to bring me a cup of tea up here to my room, for I really don't feel equal to going down yet."

"Aren't you well, Dora?" asked Bella, "and, oh! I forgot to ask, have you seen your dress for this evening? Mine is lovely," went on the light-hearted girl. "They only came home this morning, Simpson says, by the early train, you know, from London. Now I must go, or I shall be late," and so saying, she ran out of the room without waiting for an answer to her questions, so hurriedly asked.

I had a cup of tea in my own room, and feeling somewhat better, I went down into the morning room. No one was there except Aunt Carrie.

“Where are Willie and Mr. Claremont, Auntie?” I enquired.

“Gone out for a ride, dear, I think,” she made reply, in her low, sweet tones. She was a very fine woman, a few years younger than my father, but perfectly upright in her carriage, and not a grey hair to be seen in her neatly coiled plaits, on which rested a tiny bit of filmy lace. She always dressed in black or grey, and was what the world pronounced her to be, a perfect gentlewoman, a widow, and childless. And now, dear reader, you have the description of Aunt Carrie.

“Which way did they go?” I asked, referring to Willie and his tutor.

“I don’t know,” she answered, “but I heard Willie telling Bella they should be gone about an hour.”

I wandered about, and presently went into the conservatory and found Edmund

(now home from Cambridge) busily engaged in fastening a Christmas rose in Bella's drooping curls. She turned aside to hide her blushing face from me, but Edmund drew her towards him and said, "Doesn't she look charming with that rose there, Dot?"

"Yes," I answered, "and it will just suit her dress for this evening." But thinking perhaps they would rather be alone, I left them, to go and wander about, as of late I had got into the habit of doing, in a vague, purposeless manner.

I strolled on into the grounds, and fell into thinking over the last few months of my life. Nothing bright to look back upon, but everything was dark—dark as the night.

The murdered man had been buried in a nameless grave; and nothing being discovered at the inquest, necessarily the verdict given had been "Wilful murder

against some person or persons unknown," and thus had it ended, as far as the world was concerned; and only two hearts knew the real truth as to how he came by his death, and who the murderer was.

The morning was bright and frosty, and the ground was frozen hard, and sparkled like diamonds in the clear sunlight.

I could hear the merry voices of children, laughingly replying to each other as they went sliding backwards and forwards on the ice over a pond close to the palings outside the shrubbery. "How happy they are," I said to myself; but presently one of them set up a loud cry, as he slipped and fell on the ice. He was soon up again, however, laughing noisily, and evidently enjoying the sport as much, if not more, than his companions; and so I left them. "Happy children," I thought, "enjoy yourselves in your youth, for soon

the world's rough usage will turn your joy into sorrow."

After a short walk in the village I returned home, and at luncheon Edmund proposed our going to skate on the lake in the hall grounds. "For," said he, "the ice is quite thick enough, and it will be an enjoyable way of passing the afternoon."

Oh! that that skating expedition had never been proposed! How many tears would have remained unshed; and one true heart would have been left to sympathize with, and comfort me in the dark days that were to come.

Our party consisted of the Vicar, the Rev. George Hawthorne, and his two daughters—he didn't take any active part in the afternoon's amusement, he was one of the lookers on; two Miss Vandykes, handsome, dashing girls, and their brother, Lieutenant Cecil Vandyke, a very effeminate

young man ; together with a college chum of Edmund's, and he completed the party. My father did not join us, for he said he had some business to attend to, and we left him shut up in his study alone. Always there, now, unless at meal-times, or for an hour or two in the drawing-room of an evening. Our other friends had not as yet arrived, but we all were to meet in the evening—and so it was arranged, but “ *l'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.*”

We started off to walk to the lake, in twos and threes, most of them laughing merrily—and a happy party we appeared to be—my heart was the only heavy one that day—and many questioned me about my pale face. So I tried to appear more lively, and to talk cheerfully to my companion, the Vicar. There were a few skaters on the lake when we arrived, but no one I knew.

All seemed bent on enjoying themselves,

and our party was scattered over every part of the lake in a very short time.

The ice was stronger in some parts than others, and a board marked "dangerous" was placed to keep all away from that part of the ice deemed not sufficiently strong for safety. All went well for about an hour, when I saw Willie and my brother's friend approaching the part marked "dangerous," and ere I could make myself heard, for I saw their danger, and they did not. There was a shout, a rush—and Willie had disappeared under the treacherous ice.

Can I ever forget the next half hour? during which time Willie was nowhere to be seen.

Mr. Claremont had at once rushed off to find ropes, hoping to be in time to save his dearly loved pupil's life. No one dared venture near enough to be of any assistance, could we have seen him; but he was

sucked under the ice, and there was nothing for us to do but to wait, wait—when every minute seemed an hour. Soon, however, Mr. Claremont returned, breathless with running, and with him were two men with ropes, but no where could my poor brother be seen.

Great was the excitement, and every one expressing the utmost sorrow at once—for Willie was known to most of the people who were on, or near the lake at the time of the accident. Just now a shout was raised, some one had caught sight of his beautiful brown hair ; and one of the men threw out a rope, which had a huge hook attached at one end, and after several unsuccessful attempts they succeeded in hooking it into his clothes, and by this means, I saw my darling brother dragged on to the grass by the side of the lake.

There he lay, who, only an hour ago had

been so full of life and health, his white face turned up to the sky, and his teeth fast locked together.

“Is he dead,” was asked on all sides.

Only one answer could be given—my bright handsome brother lay dead before me, for he had been nearly an hour in the water before he could be got out.

I did not weep ; I could not ; my heart seemed turned to stone within me. I stood by what remained of my fondly loved brother, waiting with the rest for the return of the men, who had gone to get something on which to carry him home—when I was startled by seeing my father appear in the distance.

Some one must have been and told him of the sad accident ; on he came, with wild-looking eyes and pallid face, almost as white as the one lying before me, so calm and still.

As soon as he caught sight of the body, he threw himself down beside it, as it lay, and cried out in his agony—"Would to God that I had died, and your bright young life had been spared ! Oh my boy, my boy—truly the sins of the parents are visited upon the children." I thought, as I listened, of that one "great sin" of which I alone was cognizant—and then I understood the meaning of that exceeding bitter cry.

They bore him home upon a gate, hurriedly wrenched from its hinges ; one who had left it so short a time before, the life of the party, and the remaining joy of my life—bore him home, followed by those friends who had assembled to celebrate his birthday.

Sad birthday ! A mournful procession it was from the lake—hushed now were the voices, and tears in every eye.

My father walked close to Willie, carry-

ing the poor boy's hat—and Edmund and Mr Claremont were on either side of him.

Bella wept continuously, in fact mine was the only tearless face in the whole sad group

Oh ! if I could only have wept as the others did ! But no ! tears would not come at my bidding, yet my heart was bursting, and my brain felt on fire.

Many of the villagers had congregated round the gates, leading up to the house ; but they made way for us to pass, and I could hear words of sorrow on every side ; for every one loved Willie, down to the little stable boy.

As we entered the house, Willie's dog, "Nep," came wagging his tail, thinking, no doubt, he would meet the young master he served so faithfully—but who never again would speak to him, or pat his great shaggy head.

Henceforth "Nep" should be my dog,

and my care to treat him carefully, and fondly, as Willie had done.

They carried Willie up stairs, and took him in the room he had left only a few hours before, in full life and vigour ; and where he now lay lifeless, on the day that had been looked forward to with such pleasure —“ his birthday !” Only twenty-one—dead ! in his youth and beauty—stricken down like a flower !

The blinds were all lowered, and notes were despatched to the different friends we had asked to join us in the evening, and several of the friends already in the house began to prepare for their departure ; and the home which such a short time before was one of happiness and pleasure—had become the house of sorrow and weeping. So little do we know, what a day, aye, an hour will bring forth.

Edmund sorrowed deeply, for it was his

suggestion that we should go to the lake to skate, and he looked upon himself in a measure, as the cause of Willie's death.

Poor Bella was quite hysterical at times, for she too loved Willie as a brother.

The fruits of my father's crime were fast ripening I thought ; and before going to my room that night, I went into Willie's—and looked at him as he lay there—so calm, and still ; and I knelt down by his side, and prayed that my father's sin might not be visited on his remaining children ; and then for the first time that day I wept, as if the floodgates of my soul were loosed ; and I then thought those tears saved me from madness—and think so still.

After awhile I grew calmer, and as I closed my door for the night, I saw my father go into the room I had just left, and close and lock the door, locking himself in with the dead.

And so closed the Christmas Eve which had long been looked forward to with so much pleasure.





CHAPTER VII.

THE FUNERAL.

THE day following, was, as you know, Christmas-day. The morning was bright and clear, and it was some time after I awoke before I could persuade myself that yesterday's sad event had not been a dreadful dream. Too soon I found it was not a dream, however, but a sad reality, and that I should never hear my brother's voice again, and never again feel the touch of his hand, and that now we must part, and he would be put away out of my sight for evermore, in this world ; yet I hoped to

meet him again in a brighter, where sorrow and trouble are unknown ; even where my prisoned soul should be loosed from its fetters by the hand of God.

My cup of sorrow was full, pale and heavy-eyed I went down to the quiet rooms, looking so sad and dismal that bright Christmas morning. Presently the bells of the little village church began to ring, and as the sound floated on to me, borne on the light morning winds, a feeling of peace gradually stole over me, and I crept once more to the room where Willie lay, and once again fell on my knees by the bed, and prayed for strength to bear my trouble to the end, and for " light " on my seeming dark and gloomy future.

My father kept his room all day, and I walked to the little church, and crept into our large crimson-curtained pew. I was alone, and I drew the curtains close all

round, completely hiding myself from view, for I could not bear to be gazed at, and commented on, in my grief; and as I sat and listened to the words spoken by our good old Vicar, "Peace on earth, and goodwill towards men," I grew calmer, and for a moment felt almost happy, but only for a moment—and now, although many years have elapsed since that time, still that morning's service comes back to me, even to the minutest details. I remember dreamily noting the pretty decorations, which ornamented the different parts of the church, and thought how last year I had helped in the work—but then I was happy—now, I was wretched, and had grown selfish in my grief.

I found myself trying to see in what the decorations differed from those of the year before.

On the altar was a cross, composed of

white hot-house flowers—on a ground-work of moss. I made the cross last year—this year I had done nothing; and the font, which had been my pet piece of work, now stood quite bare—evidently it had gone unnoticed.

Thus was I thinking—apart from the beautiful service that was going on around me—when I heard the words, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men,” given out by the Vicar; and after a short discourse, the hymn—“Hark! the herald angels sing,” was began, and in spite of myself, I found I was joining in the singing, and I went on to the close of that most beautiful and glorious song of praise. Then, after a short prayer, and the benediction from the Vicar, the organ pealed joyously forth, as if welcoming the day, and I saw happy faces, and heard

pleasant greetings on every side as friends met in the porch, and wished each other a "Merry Christmas!" But no one spoke to me; they all looked towards me, with a pitying expression upon their faces; and I walked back home as I had walked to church—alone, gloomily and sorrowfully to our saddened home.

Christmas-day fell on a Thursday that year, and the funeral was to take place on the following Monday.

Bella came to talk to me about mourning dresses; but I couldn't think about dress of any description, my only thoughts then were, that after Monday I should never see my best loved brother again.

"Oh! Willie," I often sobbed, "I cannot let you go!" So they had to arrange everything without any help from me.

Sunday came, calm and peaceful, but I was too weak to go to church, so I stayed

at home, and only Edmund and Mr. Claremont went for the morning service. My father kept his room all the day, and in answer to the messages repeatedly sent, the same reply was returned as before—he did not wish to be disturbed.

Monday—the day of the funeral—was dark and dreary, with a dull, heavy sky, and a thick fog. The leafless trees dripped slowly and silently, as if weeping for the bright youth who was that day to be hidden for ever from our sight.

I sat in my room, very weak and faint, listening to the mournful tolling of the bell, borne to me through the fog and damp, and with no other sound to break the monotonous stillness.

I had that morning taken a last fond look at all that now remained of my brother Willie. Presently I heard sounds as of many feet on the stairs, and a few

minutes later, I saw the dismal procession moving slowly down the drive, and away towards the church. I heard the bell give a last knell, and then, I remember no more.

For days and weeks I lay in a burning fever, restlessly tossing about, brought on, the doctors said, by grief at the loss of my brother.

Ah! they little knew the real cause of my illness. How could they tell that I had a greater cause for grief than even his death? Still that was their opinion, and they then recommended a change of air and scene for a while, but I would not be moved, I longed to die, and join Willie; but God willed it otherwise, and I slowly recovered.

To my oft-asked question—"What did I talk about when I was delirious?" my nurse answered, "Oh, poor Mast' Willie—always Willie."

Then was I thankful, for my father's sake, that the secret that was sapping my life away had not been divulged by me in my mad ravings.

Each day I grew stronger, and as soon as I was able I walked to the church, and soon found what I sought.

The green mound was nestling under a spreading yew, close to where our mother lay. He whose young life was so full of promise and hope had gone to a brighter home than this, his earthly one, even "Where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest."





CHAPTER VIII.

THE WEDDING.

MORE than a year had elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapter took place.

Mr. Claremont left us soon after Willie's death, having nothing further to stay for, now that his pupil had been taken away; and Edmund was still at Cambridge, but we were expecting him home at midsummer, when, having taken his degree, he would be appointed to a curacy at Fordhan, now vacant, and near to us; and Bella and he were to be married the following August.

I had long known they loved each other, and as there was no reason why they should wait, they had fixed upon August as the time for the wedding to take place.

The first blush of spring was just beginning to show itself, and the hedges were putting forth tiny green buds—snowdrops, too, had begun to show their modest heads in numerous patches in the garden beneath my window, and I could see a few primroses a little lower down on the green bank, as I sat there that lovely spring morning. It was so pleasant to sit and listen to the birds, and to feel the soft, clear air as it came through in the open window. All the earth seemed welcoming spring, and its change from damp and frost to clear skies and tender budding leaves.

All went on just as usual. My father, now bowed down like an old man, still kept himself shut up in his study.

The murdered man was almost forgotten, and I never heard the subject mentioned, except once, about a month from the time I write this, and that was by old Reuben, the gardener.

I was in the greenhouse, busily engaged in re-potting a few of my favourite plants, when all at once he startled me by saying—

“Mees Dora, I often wonder if that puir man who was found in the river has left anyone behind to murn for him?”

I forget the reply I made, but I feared lest my face would betray me, so I hurried away out of his sight, not daring to remain near him longer.

I found myself often thinking over Reuben's remark, and asked myself “What made him speak to me—could he know anything?” But no, I told myself, that was impossible, I alone knew my father's

secret, which was fast dragging him down to the earth, and quenching the young life in his only daughter.

Reuben had been in our family from a boy, and we knew him to be a good and faithful servant. He was cunning in some things, I knew, and also a suspicious old man at times, but I don't think he thought the Duke's family superior to our own, which was a very old one, and dated back to William the Conqueror's time. I observed Reuben watching me at times, as if he were trying to fathom something mysterious about me.

I trembled when I thought perhaps he too knew something of that awful night; but again I told myself, that could not be, for he was at home, and probably asleep in bed at that late hour; and so I tried to comfort myself. I have often wondered in later years how I lived at the time of

which I am now writing, for my life was so joyless, and I was left alone so much to my own resources. Sometimes I would think perhaps it was wicked for me to conceal my father's crime, but then again I would think of Edmund and Bella, and the disgrace that would fall upon us when it became published to the world ; so I resolved, rather than blight my only brother's life, by disclosing my share of the secret, I would go with it unrevealed to my grave. I longed for death then, and often thought that to die would be much easier than to live as I was then living ; but God was good, and He in His great goodness spared me for happier days, though when they came I was no longer young.

May had come, with its bright and fragrant blossoms, and the hawthorn bushes were in full bloom, and the birds

seemed to vie with each other in singing the sweetest notes. We had heard but twice from Mr. Claremont since he left us, and he was at Oxford, taking his B.A. degree, he told us. An uncle had died, leaving his money to his favourite nephew, Alfred Claremont, and so now he was able to complete his university career, and fit himself for the profession he had chosen, that of a minister of the Church of England.

I still loved him, but never dared to think of him in the light of a husband, or a nearer friend than he now was, with that secret on my mind. I felt sure he loved me, and blushed when I found myself wondering whether he would come back to see us, and tell us with his own lips of his good fortune.

I thought he would come some day, and hoped it too ; but it was long ere the time

arrived that he did come near us—so long, that I began to ask myself if he really did love me? I soon forgot, however, his being absent so long, in the pleasure of hearing him talk, and seeing his dear familiar face again, in the after-time when he did come to us.

I often thought then, that husband and love were not for me, and when friends rallied me, and inquired when I was going to follow Bella's example, I would say with a serious air, "I shall never marry—never." And people shook their heads and said, "Ah, poor child, she has never got over her brother's death," and pitied me.

"Ah!" I thought, "if they only knew my real sorrow, would they still pity me? Would they not shun me instead, and the disgrace which would rest upon such as I was—a murderer's daughter?"

Midsummer came in all its full loveliness. Flowers bloomed on every side, and old Reuben had filled the verandah with his choicest plants, brilliant with many-coloured flowers. The perfume of mignonette scented the air, and the dew lay shining upon the grass and flowers when I started for my usual morning's ramble. A great cluster of passion-flowers stood near the verandah, and I stooped to gather some of the sad, mystical flowers. I always loved passion-flowers; roses and other flowers there were in profusion; but I preferred my passion-flowers.

To-morrow was Edmund's wedding-day. I thought how lovely Bella would look as a bride, and then reflected on my own sad fate.

A few friends had assembled, to be present at the ceremony the following morning, which was to make the two "one

flesh," and they were congratulating Bella—just as I returned from my walk—upon her marriage, and also the many beautiful presents she had received; and Edmund upon his choice of a lovely as well as amiable wife; for that she soon would be now—only a few hours before they would both be at God's altar, vowing to love and cherish each other until death should them part.

That day she had on a plain white muslin dress, with broad blue ribbons, and a ribbon to match in her golden hair. The excitement had added a delicate flush to her usually fair face, and which greatly added to her loveliness.

How happy they seemed. Still I did not envy Bella her happiness. I should be sorry to lose her, for now she was going away, my life would be more lonely still, and I should miss my companion in

my walks and drives. She often made the dull house more cheerful with her sunny temper and lively ways ; and besides, she was clever, and accomplished in most things.

My father had quietly given his consent to the marriage when asked, and then seemed to forget all about it, until Edmund reminded him that he would have to "give Bella away" on the morrow. He had been to church but twice since Willie's death, and appeared to be so disturbed during the service the last time he was there, that I felt relieved when he did not accompany us, as he had always been accustomed to do.

I never entered the study now, unless compelled to do so, for the room had a kind of sickening terror for me whenever I entered it ; and the night before the wedding every room but that one was a

blaze of light; and servants were hurrying hither and thither, with an indescribable air of importance on their smiling faces, showing how fully they approved of their young master's choice; and their bustling activity declared their anxiety lest any hitch should mar the morrow's joyful proceedings. And as I went up to my room that night Bella came after me, and closing the door, seated herself and said, "Now, Dora, let us have a nice long chat together," and twining her arm round my waist, she drew me down beside her, and there we sat talking—as girls will talk—until the early hours of her wedding day dawned upon us. And this was a part of our conversation—

"Dora," began Bella, "you are so changed in the last two years; I often wonder what it is that has changed you so. Edmund sees the change, too, dear,

and he says he's afraid you haven't yet done fretting about poor Willie. But Dora, I saw this change in you before Willie's death; tell me what it is that's troubling you."

"I cannot tell you, Bella," I answered, "or anyone else. Some day—but not from me—you will perhaps understand all that is now so bewildering to you, but I cannot tell you now, so don't press me any more, but kiss me, and go to bed."

She did so—looking at me earnestly at the time—and said, "Well, Dora, I won't ask you any more questions now, you look so wan and wee, dear," and so saying, she turned away and left me—left me to sit and think over what she had said, and to look in my glass and find that she was right in saying that I looked "wan and wee."

The morning of the wedding day was bright and glorious—all nature was de-

liciously fresh and lovely—with not a cloud on the clear blue summer sky; and I was awakened early by the birds caroling forth their sweet morning song.

It was a quiet wedding; the bride looked lovely in her dress of plain white silk, which hung in long flowing robes around her, and was looped up at the side with large bunches of natural orange-blossoms (sent over from the hall), and a wreath of the same flowers were in her golden hair, with a long white veil over all, and a very handsome bouquet in her hand.

Edmund looked justly proud of her; and as she gave me a last kiss, before getting into the carriage which was to convey them to the station, she said, "Now, Dora, you must write to me often, and be my first visitor after we get home. Promise me you will come and stay with me—do."

I could not promise anything then, but I said I should not go anywhere else ; so she was at last satisfied ; and her husband then came to take his place by her side in the carriage, and soon we were left standing on the steps waving our handkerchiefs, until a turn in the drive hid them from our view. They were going on the Continent for a month ; and Bella wrote me some very interesting letters, describing the different places they visited on their tour.

The first place they stopped at was Paris. Bella was delighted with everything she saw there ; and the music at the Champs Elysees, was beautiful, she wrote.

From Paris they proceeded to Antwerp, where they remained a week ; and Edmund was in raptures with the carving and pictures they saw in the different churches

there. They then went to Ghent, where they remained but one day, and Bella was charmed with the beautiful lace she saw at the "Beguinage," which is made by the sisters of a religious order in Ghent. All this was highly interesting to me, who never went anywhere; and while I was reading Bella's letters, I was not thinking over my trouble; so I used to look anxiously every morning for the old postman, and to feel disappointed the whole day if there wasn't a letter for me.





CHAPTER IX.

WHAT REUBEN SAW AT MIDNIGHT.

HE time soon passed away that Edmund and Bella were to remain abroad, and they were expected home from their honeymoon on the 2nd of August.

I missed Bella very much, she was always lively and cheerful. My father, too, must have felt her absence, for he was fond of hearing her play and sing, on the rare occasions when he went into the drawing room of an evening.

He was fast becoming an old man, and looked at least ten years older than he

really was. He never went into society, and never saw anyone except our old Clergyman, whom he couldn't well refuse, having known him so many years.

Now that Bella was gone I dismissed our maid, for my wants were so few I did not think it necessary to retain her to wait upon me alone. My father's income was a very handsome one, so that it was not for any pecuniary reasons that I chose to send her away.

The sun streamed brightly into my window as I sat writing at the desk that was my mother's, and my heart felt brighter than it had done for weeks. I felt stronger—and at my age it was hard to be always pining and grieving for what I couldn't remedy.

I had that morning received a note, written by a stranger to me, in fact some one unknown had sent it, and the writing

was large, and clearly that of some uneducated person.

I did not at all understand the meaning of the contents, and it puzzled me a deal. It had been left at the house by a boy, and Reuben gave it to me in the green-house, as I was attending to my plants. This is what it contained—

“Mees Dora,

“Plees cum in the shrubbery at 10 to-neet, as I hev sumthin’ to confess—
an plees cum alone—be sure now one else must no of this meetin’.

“Your faithfu Servant,

“An well-wisher.”

And that was all. Now, who could the writer be? I kept asking myself; but I resolved to go to the shrubbery and see what it could mean, and also to keep my visit a secret from the household. Accord-

ingly when night came, I told the servants I was going to my room, and after locking my door, I began to prepare for my walk to the shrubbery. I wrapped myself in a long, dark cloak ; and as the time drew near I trembled with excitement, and an untold dread, for something told me that this meeting had to do with that dreadful night, never to be effaced from my memory while life lasted.

After first making sure that no one was about, I carefully descended into the hall, and through the little side door before-mentioned, over the lawn, to the trim path leading to the shrubbery.

It was a calm, still night, and the stars were just beginning to peep out. Not a breath of wind stirred the leaves, and my footsteps were the only sound that broke the stillness of the night which reigned around me.

I had not proceeded far down the path when I heard steps approaching, and a voice out of the darkness said, "Don't be afraid, its only Reuben, Mees Dora."

My heart was beating so loud and so fast, I couldn't speak for a few minutes; but at last I found voice to ask, "Was it you who sent me the note this morning?"

"Yes, Mees Dora, it was. I wanted to confess somethin' I hev on my mind, but I thought maybe I'd better tell it to you when no one else was near to hearken. I wrote that note, and gave it to my darter's little boy to bring here to you; but no one knows what I put in it, save God and mysen."

"What is it you have to tell me, Reuben?" I asked "and why couldn't you tell me in daylight? I don't understand your acting in this peculiar way."

"God help me, Mees Dora, for I'm only

a puir man who hasn't many more years, and maybe months, to live; and sorry I am to hev to tell you what I hev on my mind this neet. I heven't told it to a livin' soul, and would cut off my right hand rayther than do so."

"Go on, Reuben," I said; but I was obliged to lean against a tree for support, I felt so faint and sick.

"Well, Mees Dora," he began, "it is now nearly two years since that I happened to forget to shut down the top winder in the vinery, and I'd got some plants in that must be kept warm, so I thought I'd better cum along and shut the winder and rake up the fire a bit. So I told my ole misses I'd forgot summat, and that I shouldn't be long gone. So after getting her to bed, I locked the door, and cum along to the vinery here."

"Well, I'd fastened the winder, and had

just finished making up the fire, when I heerd a door, as I thought, open at the front of the house, and as I didn't want to be seen there so late at neet, why I just stood still behind that ere yew tree a facin' the front of the house, and as sure as I stand here this minnit, Mees Dora, I see Sir Wilfred come out through the winder a carryin' a man on his shoulders, and I see him drag that same man down to the river. Then he walked to the boat-house, got out the boat, and put that dead man aboard—I felt he was dead, you see, Mees. Then Sir Wilfred rowed a bit down stream, and then I could see no more, and just as I was a thinkin' of goin' home again—bewildered with what I had seen—I heard the boat coming through the water, and after Sir Wilfred 'ad put the boat back in the boat-house, he turned and stood lookin' a long time in the water, and then

ran up to the house as if summat was behind him, and disappeared through his study winder, or door as you may call it. I saw him shut the door, and then I cum out of my hidin'-place. It was a very bright night, and I could see everythin' very plain like, tho' my eyes do be gettin' dim.

"I don't know how I got home after seein' all that; my legs shook so I was obliged to sit down and rest twice, but at last I got to the cottage, and very thankful I was to get there.

"My misses was asleep, an' my mind was that upset with what I had seen that I never got a wink o' sleep that neet.

"When that ere body was found, I knowed it was the same I see Sir Wilfred put in the boat; but God forgive me if I did wrong, but I couldn't tell that it was my own master that had done that deed!

I've often wanted to talk to ye, Mees Dora, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, and why I do so now is that I wanted to ask a favour from you. You see, Mees Dora, I've had several bad attacks in my head, and I fear some day I may be taken worse; so if I should be taken ill sudden like, will you let me be put in one o' the servant's rooms? This thing has been so long on my mind, that I fear I might talk about what I see that neet, when I am 'lirious you know; an' I don't want to bring any trouble on ye, Mees Dora."

All this time I had stood quite still, listening in a dazed kind of way to what Reuben had been saying; but I could not fail to understand the good old man's meaning. So after awhile I said—

"I, too, saw the man taken to the river, Reuben, and only God knows what I have suffered since that night—but oh! Reuben,

good old man, I could not betray my own father !”

“No, no, Mees Dora,” he answered, “I’ve watched ye mony a time, and I knew as well as if ye’d told me that ye knew as much as I did ; but you must bear up Mees, and hope that God will bring Sir Wilfred to repentence ; and promise me, Mees Dora, that ye will cum to me, should I be taken ill.”

I assured the old man that I myself would nurse and watch over him, should he be stricken down by illness of any kind. For what did I not owe to him ? With a word he could have brought ruin and disgrace upon us all.

My tears flowed fast, and it was some time before I could again speak ; but drying my eyes, I said—

“Reuben, I can never repay you for what you have done for all of us, in con-

cealing from the world what you saw that night. You are a true friend."

"Plees say no more, Mees Dora," he went on, "for have I not known you from a little child? Sorry I should be to be the cause o' bringing trouble to any o' ye. And now I hev told ye what was pressin' on my mind, I feel more contented, and I think I will now go home to my ole woman. Good neet, an' God bless ye, Mees Dora; an' beggin' ye'r pardon for bringin' ye out this neet in the cold." And turning slowly round he moved away into the darkness, and left me to go sadly and sorrowfully back to the now darkened house. No, one light still burned, and that was in the study; so I knew my father was still there. I reached my room unperceived, and locked the door, and then sat down to think over the events of the last hour; and so I sat still when the dawn

of another day began to appear, and after bathing my face in cold water, I lay down on my bed, and kind sleep closed my weary eyes, and for a time banished all sad thoughts from my mind.





CHAPTER X.

FOUND DROWNED.

WHEN I awoke, the sun was shining bright and warm into my room, and after breakfast was over, I prepared myself for a walk through the village, to the park.

I felt I must have quiet; and, half stifled with the closeness of the house, I lazily watched the herds of deer as they went trooping down to the water to drink, and the dew on the grass sparkling in the bright sunlight like diamonds. I could hear the church clock in the distance striking the quarters, and it alone broke

the stillness of the morning air. And after sauntering slowly along for about an hour, I sat down under a huge copper beech which directly faced the hall ; its gleaming white walls and terraces looking so fresh and picturesque among the green trees.

One day in the year—commonly called “Row Wakes Thursday” in the different towns composing the Midland Counties—the park was thrown open to the public ; and then the scene defies description. Hundreds of people of both sexes flocked from all the neighbouring towns to spend their holiday in Trenthaven Park. Always on that special day—called “Trenthaven day”—people of all classes, and in all kinds of vehicles, lined the roads, and smiling, happy faces could everywhere be seen, all bent on the day’s pleasure, hurrying to Trenthaven Park.

Several bands of music generally accompanied them, and dancing was kept up until darkness came on, and then the day's pleasure was over. Hundreds of the poorer classes look forward to "Trenthaven day" as their most pleasurable day in the year. And then again, when the blue-bells were in full bloom, that was another treat for those whose time was at their own disposal; and people would come from all parts to see them in their perfection. They grew in such numbers amid the trees, that in the distance the ground had the appearance of a blue carpet covering over all, and their perfume was delightful. Yes, surely Trenthaven was a very lovely spot, and I often wondered the Duke didn't spend more of his time at the Hall, midst so much to charm the eye.

Such were my thoughts as I sat in the

park that lovely August morning. I felt refreshed after my walk, and the beautiful scenery around me seemed to lighten my burden of harrowing thoughts. It was not for long though—I soon found myself pondering over Reuben's confession of the night before, and it should be my care, I told myself, to watch over him in his declining years, should I be spared. Presently I got up and began to retrace my steps towards home; I stopped to have a chat with Mrs. Monkton, at the lodge, and then called to see several old people in the village, who were always pleased to see me.

I had not seen my father that morning; and as I sat down to my lonely dinner, I was surprised to see him enter the dining-room—for he scarce ever left his study now, as I have said before—and that night he looked older and more shrunken if

possible then I'd ever seen him look. After dinner (of which I could not persuade him to touch), he went with me into the drawing-room, and said—

“Dora, play to me something soft and sweet! as you used to do, dear.”

I did as he desired, wondering the while at the change in him; but pitying him in my heart at the same time.

As I was leaving the room for the night he said, “kiss me, my child!” and I did as he desired, “and promise me,” he went on, “that whatever you may discover when I have ceased to breathe, that you'll not think harshly of your father—your poor wretched father.”

Tears filled my eyes and streamed down my cheeks, and crying out, “Oh! papa, papa! how can I bear it all?” I hurried out of the room, and rushing up stairs I threw myself on to my bed, and for a time gave

myself up to uncontrollable grief, at the thought of my father's guilt. These thoughts were nearly more than I could bear, but being a good sleeper I sobbed myself to sleep, and for a time forgot them.

Before daylight next morning I was aroused by a loud knocking at my door. I jumped out of bed, and saw Mrs. Wardle, the housekeeper, standing outside the corridor.

"What is the matter!" I asked, "Come into my room and tell me."

"Oh! Miss Dora, my dear Miss Dora! that river, that dreadful river!" And so saying, she dropped down into a chair, and began to sob and rock herself too and fro in a frantic manner.

"What is the matter?" I asked once more. "Tell me," I cried.

"Sir Wilfred," she gasped, and again stopped, as if quite unable to proceed.

“ My father, what of him, where is he ? ” and without waiting for an answer, I snatched up my dressing-gown, and rushed across the corridor into his room, but he was nowhere to be seen, and his bed had not been slept in.

Something must have happened to him, and going back into my own room, I said to Mrs. Wardle, “ Tell me, at once, where my father is, and I will go to him.”

She slowly proceeded to dry her eyes, and then said, “ Oh, Miss Dora, you must not go to him ; he is in the boat-house.”

Then I knew that he was dead, and I fainted. After a while I recovered, and begged to know how he came to be in the boat-house.

“ Don’t take on so, and I will tell you, Miss Dora,” said the old housekeeper.

“ Tell me, quickly,” I entreated.

“ One of the men was going to his work,

a little way down the river side," she began, "and he saw a man in the water. He couldn't tell who it was at first, for it wasn't sufficiently light for him to see plainly, so he got the boat out, and brought the poor man to the boat-house, and waited until it got light, and then he saw it was Sir Wilfred, and he at once came up to the house and told Thomas that his master was lying dead in the boat-house. Oh, Miss Dora! and Master Edmund coming home to-day. What shall I do, what shall I do?" And the poor old soul sobbed as if her heart would break.

Once again tears refused to come to my relief, and I felt as if this new shock would be the death of me. I began to dress, resisting all Mrs. Wardle's entreaties to lie still and rest. No, there was no rest for me that day, and after putting on a few things, I wrapped a dark cloak round me,

and went out, to walk down to the boat-house.

How vividly is that scene impressed upon my memory. Dawn was just breaking, and the stillness was unbroken by a single sound, the tall trees looking weird and ghost-like, in the uncertain light. A few stars were still visible, and "Nep," too, seemed impressed by the scene, as he paced slowly by my side.

Presently I reached the boat-house, and saw someone moving within, in the dim light. It was poor old Reuben; and as soon as he saw me, he said, "Ah, Mees Dora, an' are ye there? This is a sorrowful day for ye all."

I passed him, to where my father lay, cold and stiff. Yes, there he lay, with the water slowly dripping all round him, out of his clothes. He was dead—gone to be judged at the Great Judgment-seat, for all

his sins and misdeeds done in the flesh—and he had died by the same death as his favourite son.

I was roused from these thoughts by Reuben saying, “I wonder how the puir master got into the water? He must have been in some long time, for he was quite dead, Jim Coates says, when he pulled him out of the river.

“Weel, weel, he was a good master to me, and may the Lord have marcy on his soul, amen, amen,” and lifting his hat reverently, the tears coursing down his withered old cheeks, Reuben turned away and left me alone with the dead.

How vividly that other scene presented itself before me, when Willie lay dead; but he had not the crime of “Murder” on his soul.

I, too, asked myself, “How came my father to be in the river?” As I thought,

another dreadful idea came across my mind, "was 'suicide' to be laid to his charge before that Great Tribunal, in addition to his other crime?" The thought was agony to me, and I fell down in a swoon, and was carried to the house, insensible.

For that day and the next, I was conscious only at intervals, and on the morning of the third day I fell into a sound, refreshing sleep, and that probably saved me from another illness.

I telegraphed for Edmund to come at once, and he and his bride arrived the evening of the fourth day after that on which my father was "found drowned." They had intended being home a few days earlier but had prolonged their stay at Aunt Carrie's.

It was a sad termination to their honeymoon, and Edmund looked pale and anxious when they arrived. Poor Bella cried a

long time, for the dead man had been as a father to her ; and for a time she refused to be comforted.

Once again the house was one of sadness, and many were the questions asked as to how my father met with his death, but it was a mystery, as mysterious as that other affair had been, and no one could give any answer. Only Reuben and myself knew how that unknown foreigner—that “stranger in a strange land,” had met with his doom—for a “stranger” he must be. No one could tell who he was, or what his purpose was in being there. It was one of those secrets which would never be revealed until the secrets of all hearts are laid bare, I thought.

The inquest ended, as many do end. Nothing was known as to how my father came to be drowned, and a verdict of “Found Drowned,” was returned, and

that was all ; and the busy world went on, and paused not to note the sorrow of one lonely heart—more sorrowful now than before. My cross was a heavy one, heavier than most of God's creatures, but I thought the outward cross is not always alike heavy. God gives his children a little respite. After they have been long tried, he sometimes removes their troubles, and gives them ease ; after many dark days a fine season comes, finer for coming after them. The sky grows clear and serene, the air softer, and the sun shines with warm and enlivening rays, and everything smiles around them ; and so I hoped some day it might be with me, when my cross had grown lighter. Now I was weighed down to the ground with this last great trouble and the thought that my father had died with—— “ Murder,” on his soul, made my days as the darkest, blackest night.



CHAPTER XI.

WHAT I FOUND IN MY FATHER'S DESK.

THREE months had passed away since the burial of my father, and Christmas was once more drawing near—Christmas, with its holly and bright scarlet berries, its meetings of long separated friends, and its scores of pleasant things connected with it. I still lived at “The Limes,” and resisted all Edmund’s and Bella’s entreaties to go and live with them.

Thomas, and the old housekeeper still remained with me; and old Reuben still attended to the vines, and kept the garden

neat as of old. He was getting very infirm now, and was in very great trouble, for his poor old wife had died, leaving him alone in the world ; and as long as he could crawl to the cottage, he would not be persuaded to come and live in the house, letting Mrs. Wardle take care of him, as it was my wish for him to do.

“ No, no, Mees Dora,” he said, when I talked to him about it, “ I’ll jest toddle to the cottage and back as long as I can, and then when I canna do’t longer, I’ll cum to the house.” And thus it was with him that cold winter month.

It was about the second week in December, and the ground was covered with snow, which was blown into drifts, almost rendering the roads impassable. So finding I couldn’t go out for a walk, as was my usual custom, I thought I would go into the study and look over my father’s

papers and desk, which until then I had neglected doing.

The desk he had given me years ago ; and about a fortnight before his sad end he said to me, " Dora, if anything should happen to me, you, and you alone, must examine my papers."

I wondered at the time what papers he was alluding to, and it was for the purpose of satisfying myself that I went into the study that day. I had a fire lighted, and the shelves dusted, for since my father's death the room had been shut up. But when I entered it had quite a cheerful appearance. The fire was blazing brightly, and the winter sun streamed in between the thick curtains ; but I took care to fix my seat as far as possible from that dark stain on the floor, and proceeded to unlock the desk and to try and find the papers alluded to before.

I found several packets of old letters, neatly tied together with narrow red tape, and which I found were principally relating to his business at different times with his farm bailiff, and others. There was a bundle of my mother's letters, written from Italy, Germany, and a few with the Trenthaven post-mark upon them, and these were tied with a piece of broad scarlet ribbon, which perhaps she had worn, and these I resolved to treasure, for they were the only letters I had ever seen from my mother, and I reverently put them aside.

I then went on with my self-imposed task, and was just going to replace the papers, when my hand touched a spring somewhere, and out flew a secret drawer.

I examined the desk to try and find out the whereabouts of the spring, but it was most cleverly concealed in the wood-work,

and I failed to discover it. The desk was of Italian workmanship, and in my anxiety to see what the drawer contained, I forgot all about the spring, and for some time searched about, thinking to find another drawer, for the desk was a large one, and quite capable of containing more than one hidden drawer.

After turning the desk about for some time, I re-seated myself and commenced the perusal of the contents of the drawer.

I found several formal-looking documents, and at the bottom of the drawer was a large packet, sealed, and on the outside wrapper was written, in my father's well-known handwriting—

“For my daughter Dora. To be read by her after my death.

“WILFRED TEMLEY.”

“What could it be about,” I wondered, “that my father had to write to me?”

And the more I wondered, the more perplexed I became.

Now I understood why he gave me that earnest command about his papers ; and in his will, made evidently only a few days before his death, he had said that his books and desk were for me, his beloved daughter Dora.

It had turned out a wretched afternoon, the rain coming down in torrents, and as I did not like to be in that room after dusk, I gathered up my packet of papers, and took them with me into my pleasant little sitting-room, where there were lights and a bright fire burning.

My discovery had unnerved me ; and owing to the delicate state of my health at that time, I thought it would be wiser to put off reading the papers until the morning. I should be better able to understand them, I thought, after a long night's rest.



CHAPTER XII.

"TO BE READ AFTER MY DEATH."

THE daylight was just beginning to appear when I awoke the next morning, and I drew up my blind to see if the snow had disappeared in the night. No, it was still there, looking so beautiful and pure in the half light. The little village seemed transformed, there was a white covering over all, and the snow looked as white and soft as wool.

I always loved the early morning, before the noise and bustle of the day began, when nature seemed asleep, and all around

was calm and still. All my better feelings seemed to be aroused within me at that quiet, early hour, more so than at any other time of the day. How often have I watched the sun rise and set, in its glorious bed of crimson and gold, and how insignificant I have felt after watching a glorious sunset, and gazed on the wonderful works of God. What small, weak mortals we all are.

More snow had fallen during the night, and the roads were even worse than they were the day before, and were quite impassible in some places, where the snow had drifted, in some spots completely hiding the hedges. I pitied the poor, who were obliged to go out to work in this wintry weather, not that we had many very poor families in Trenthaven, for they all found a good landlord in the Duke of Trenthaven, and they were allowed a certain

quantity of coal, during the winter months, free of cost, and their little ones had warm frocks and bright-looking straw hats, or bonnets, trimmed with red, and little red cloaks given to them, throughout the entire parish.

After breakfast was over, I drew my chair towards the cheerful fire, and began my examination of the mysterious packet, which my father had directed to me, to be read by me only, after his death; and telling Thomas not to let me be disturbed, I tore open the outer covering, but not without trembling at the thought that it might contain an explanation of that, to me, never-to-be-forgotten night in the autumn.

On the inner wrapper was written, "Dora, when you have read the enclosed I command you to put the whole of this, 'my written confession,' into the fire, with your own hands, and not to leave any por-

tion of it unconsumed—It is for your eyes alone.—W. T.” And thus it began :—

“ My dear child, my only daughter,—I must first tell you where I met your sainted mother, for she was an angel, but I was a jealous fool. Too late have I found out how I wronged her. But I must tell you that it was in Italy I first saw her, and there we were married.

She was beautiful as a dream, as beautiful as ever woman was, and as innocent and pure as the untrodden snow ; I know that now, and would to God I had known it earlier, and not given rein to my suspicious thoughts.

“ Your mother’s father was an artist, poor, but avaricious ; and he soon saw how I admired his lovely daughter, and urged her constantly to marry me.

“ She did not like to leave her old father and sunny home, to go to a strange coun-

try and unite with strange people, but I was mad and never left her until she consented to be my wife. I thought in time she would love me, and so we were married. A year after, Edmund was born, but I dared not let my father know of my marriage, so I hid my lovely bride in different places, coming over to England occasionally, so as to avoid any suspicions which might arise as to the cause of my long absences, and it was not until after you were born, that I brought your mother to her English home, and then I first began to distrust her. I did not know that she had a brother, but one day I espied her in her dressing room, weeping over the portrait of a handsome young man. Naturally, I questioned her as to the cause of her grief, and asked who the young man was, but she returned me no answer. He was her only brother, and he came here several

times when I was away, so it happened that I never saw him, but all this I learnt only a few days ago. I found a letter written by your mother a few days before her death—she died, you know, while I was away from home for a few days ; and in the confusion, and my grief at her loss, grief at the thought that she had died without one parting word, I overlooked the letter, and it was hidden away out of sight in an old bureau, which I never use now, and which stands in one corner of my study ; and there, that last letter, written by the hand of your beloved mother, had remained until a few days ago. A short time before she died, I again found her in tears, and often, when she thought herself unobserved, I have seen tears running down her cheeks.

“ Naturally of a suspicious disposition, that made me more so ; and I resolved to

watch and secure that letter I had seen her weeping over—and which she thrust out of my sight, and hid somewhere in the folds of her dress; and if it proved to be—as in my madness, I thought it was—a letter from some former lover of her's, I determined to kill him the first opportunity I had of doing so—and to search over the earth until I found him. I secured the letter, it matters not how, and it ran as follows:—

“ ‘Dearest Ellen,

“ ‘Meet me in the usual place, and do not fail to bring the money with you; and I need not say how long the moments will seem, until I once more behold you, and press you to my heart.

“ ‘STEPHANO.’

“ ‘When I had read those lines, I cursed your mother, and swore a solemn oath, that I would rest not until I had found

the writer, be it months or years before I succeeded in finding him ; for I was sure my wife was deceiving me—"she whom I loved, more than my soul." One day your mother came to me in tears, and asked—why I had changed of late towards her. I answered her not—for the demon of jealousy was strong within me—and I turned away from her beseeching eyes ; leaving her standing alone. Two months after that she died, and I then found the portrait before alluded to. You will find it in a secret drawer in my desk. It is the portrait of your uncle, and on it are the letters, 'S.P.'

"How I cursed him again and again for coming between me and my wife ; but not for a minute did I relax in my search for the original of that portrait, for then I knew not that he was my wife's only brother. One night in the autumn I was

seated in my study, with the portrait in my hand, when I heard a voice outside my window say—‘Ella, Ella, open the window, and let me enter—it is I—Stephano, come back once more.’ I was too astounded to speak, and sat perfectly still, waiting to hear once again that voice. I was partly concealed by the window curtain, and the blind was half down.

“Presently I heard the window raised, and some one stepped into the room.

“Could I believe my senses, or was my mind wandering? for my eyes met the eyes of the man whose portrait I still held in my hand. He looked older, and darker, but still I felt sure he was the same—eyes and hair the same as his portrait.

“I sprang out of my hiding-place, and snatching my old bowie knife, which always hung over the mantle-piece in my study, I fell upon him, and, God forgive me! I

struck him down with a single blow. He fell at my feet, and uttered not a word—and after one deep sigh he died, with his eyes fixed reproachfully on me.

“ Can I ever forget the next few minutes ? The remorse which came over me for what I had done. There my victim lay—dead before me ; and then for the first time, I began to realize what I had done in my mad passion—I had taken the life of a fellow-creature, and must henceforth bear the crime of murder on my guilty soul. Then the fear of discovery took possession of me, and I remembered the river. So taking up my victim upon my shoulders, I dragged him down to the river, and threw him in, but the body would not float, but remained fast in the rushes ; so I got out the boat, and placing my ghastly companion in it, I rowed some distance down the river, and then threw him out among some rushes,

where I thought he would remain hidden. How I lived afterwards, until the body was found, I know not. Often in the dead of the night have I wandered down to the river, expecting to see that corpse among the rushes—something compelled me to go. Three times in the night, after I had murdered my victim, did I go and look at the place where he lay—and each time was his white face turned up towards the sky, as if appealing to heaven for vengeance on his murderer; and the moon shone, and the stars went on twinkling, as if helping to reveal my crime, by their brilliant light. All that night I remained wandering from the river to the house; and only when the day began to dawn, did I retire to my room, fearing some one would see me at that early hour, and my being there would cause suspicion to rest upon me when the body was found. The day of the pic-nic, I

seemed to live a year, and when Willie said you had fainted on hearing the body had been found, I knew that you, my child, knew yourself to be the child of a murderer ; and never more could I bear to sit in the same room, with my innocent children.

“ Life became a burden to me. But I should like to finish my confession to you, my child, ere I quit this world for another ; for live I cannot, and I am resolved to die, for I know that another besides our two selves knows of my guilt. The night Reuben met you in the shrubbery I had gone out for a stroll to cool my heated brain, and I heard all he said to you, and was near enough to have caught you in my arms when you fell against the tree for support.

“ And now, my child, my confession is nearly ended. I cannot live longer ; I rest not, day nor night. If I sleep, I am

haunted with the sight of that white, up-turned face; and when awake, it is still there before me.

“Brightness and cheerfulness are a mockery to me in every way; and when you read this the hand that pens it will be stiff and cold. I slew my wife’s own brother, and can no longer remain a tenant of this beautiful world, which has grown hateful to my sight.

“Although he was her brother, she never told me she had one living; but I have since found out that he committed some youthful piece of mischief, and so dreaded the consequences, and flew to Ella in her English home for help and protection; and she, doubtless, fearing my anger, hid the fact of having a brother in distress from me, and no doubt her grief, caused by my neglect and cruelty, broke her tender heart. How many tears have I

shed, weeping as men seldom weep, and I dare not hope for pardon—pardon is not for such as I am; and I am resolved to die, to die as my poor boy did. Oh! that my sins were as few as his! then this confession would never have been written, and I might have lived on for years, honoured and respected among men.

“When you read this, my child, your father will be no more; and think not too harshly of him, but pray for him, and for forgiveness of his many, many sins.

“Burn this, when you have read it through; and let not Edmund know that his father was a murderer and a suicide.

“And now, my child, my Dora—so like your mother—I must say farewell, a long, long farewell, for I dare not hope to meet you in that brighter land, where such as I are not allowed to enter; nor can I hope for forgiveness for my sins, for does not

the Book say that every one of us shall give account of himself unto God ? And what will my account be ? I dare not think more just now ; but my sun is nearly set, and my dark days in this world are nearly over. Ere another's dawn, your poor, unhappy, wretched parent will have gone, to return no more.

“Tell no one how I got into the water ; let them think 'twas an accident—anything rather than the truth, for your sakes. And it may be a few days, or it may be years before you read these lines ; but never forget that through all my wickedness I loved you, even though I leave you alone in this dark and weary world. Once more farewell, for my eyes are heavy, and my head whirls, and whilst leaving you, I love you.”

“WILFRED TEMLEY.”

And those were the last words he wrote.

Thus ended his confession. My poor, unfortunate, wretched parent had now explained all that had been so mysterious to me ! And I would obey him, and at once burn those papers which contained the confession of his guilt ; and rising, I put the papers on the fire, and watched them burn until all was consumed—not a scrap remained.

“ Oh ! my father, my father ! ” I cried, “ what a sorrowful ending to your life ! and how you must have suffered ! May God, in his mercy, pardon you for your great sin ! ” And again I prayed that his sins might not be visited on his remaining children.

Then was I glad to go up into my room and lay down my weary head, for I could bear no more that day.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE PORTRAIT.

THE next morning found me still in bed, and quite unable to rise. Towards evening, feeling somewhat better, I got up but did not leave my room. The day following however, I felt much stronger, and I went down stairs into the study, and after a long search, succeeded in finding the portrait spoken of by my father.

It was encased with gold, and was the portrait of a young man, about twenty-three, I judged from the youthful appearance of the face, black curling hair, and

keen dark passionate eyes, but rather sallow complexion ; but the colours had faded, still it was a very handsome face I gazed upon.

At the back were the words—"Stephano Parati, to Ella, with his fondest love," and a tiny ring of curly black hair was enclosed within the inner case ; " that was his hair I supposed." And then I remembered the handkerchief I had picked up in the study, and which I knew belonged to my uncle Stephano. In the corner were embroidered the same letters I now saw before me ; and I argued within myself—if his name was Parati—and my mother's I knew was Cordillero, before my father married her—how then could they be brother and sister ?

There was another mystery here, and one I feared I should never unravel. My father had evidently not noticed the words on the locket, and I went at once to the

old housekeeper, and asked her if she knew what my mother's name was before she became my father's wife ?

The old woman stood thinking intently for some moments, and then said—

“ Well, Miss Dora, I cannot zactly say, but something with many l's in it—Illen or some such name. You see, Miss, I came with your papa and mamma from Dauphine, close on the borders of Italy, and I knew nothing about Lady Temley, but what she thought fit to confide in me ; but she was a charming lady, and a better mistress never breathed, than she was to me. I shall have been in this family twenty years next June, and I hope to end my days with you, Miss Dora, or near to you, please God.”

I told the dear old woman I couldn't part with her, and she was satisfied ; so finding that she could tell me nothing, I went back into my sitting-room, still

further convinced that there was another mystery in this.

Then I asked myself, what could my mother's brother have done, that was too dreadful to confide in my father's keeping. If she had confessed her relationship to him, how much misery might have been averted, and my father would now have been living, instead of rotting in his grave. The deed was done, and my knowledge of its committal I would keep to myself, and bear my burden alone.

The handkerchief I hid from view, and the locket also ; for both had grown hateful to my sight. They were the mute reminders of my father's guilt, and I shuddered whenever I looked at them.

I felt sure Stephano must be my mother's half-brother, and so *that* I tried not to think about, as I did not consider it of sufficient importance. Her father was an

old man, papa had said, so what more likely than that he should have been since married; and I felt thankful for the thought, for I had made my headache trying to solve this new problem.

Poor old Reuben grew gradually weaker each day, and had never once alluded to that conversation in the shrubbery, and I decided not to be the one to talk of it again, but to try myself not to dwell upon it in my own thoughts, as of late I had been doing.

I felt my health was failing fast, and I decided that as soon as Christmas was over, I would go and stay a while with Edmund and Bella, at their new home. Edmund was very much beloved by all his parishioners, and in his letters to me he was constantly urging me to go and live with them, instead of (to use his own expression) moping alone at "The Limes."

I still liked the old place, it was my home, and I could not bring myself to make up my mind to desert it. The days of my childhood had been spent there, and I knew every tree and bush in the grounds. They were like companions to me, who had always been so much alone—and leave my old home, I would not. So I wrote to my brother, and told him I would be with him after Christmas was over—much to Bella's delight, for she longed to see me again, she wrote.

As the winter advanced, Reuben grew worse; and at last being too weak to walk more than a few yards at a time, he was obliged to stay in the house altogether. He let his little cottage, and I had a room made comfortable for him, where he could be quiet and at his ease.

There, when he was too ill to sit up, I used to go and read to him. His time on

earth was nearly done, and his sun would soon be set, and in a very short time I should see that good and faithful servant no more until we meet on the other side by the river of life, in the heaven he longed to go to, and of which he was never tired of hearing me read or speak of.

I soon found another man to look after the vinery and keep the garden in order. He was a young man, whose parents I had known all my life, and Reuben was well contented to place his plants and even his pet dog in William's care.

Poor old Reuben suffered very much from rheumatism. Some days he could not turn himself in his bed, and the pain was most acute, but throughout the long illness which preceded his death ; he never once complained, so patient was he, and he never mentioned my father's name, which was a great relief to me.

One day, a few weeks before his death, he said, " Ah ! Mees Dora, you've been a kind friend to me, and the Lord will reward ye, I shall soon see Master Willie on t'other side, and if I can I'll tell him what ye've done for me."

He did not live long after that conversation, he grew worse each day, and a fortnight afterwards the peaceful old man was laid in the village churchyard, not very far from the grave of the master he had so faithfully loved and served.

Such was the end of one who had lived in the world upwards of seventy years, and whose life, throughout, had been one of purity and faithfulness to those he served.

Ah, Reuben, old man, I cannot too highly praise your conduct in those dark, unhappy days, which will be for ever engraven on my memory ; and in that day,

when we shall all be summoned to give account of the deeds done in the flesh, whether good or evil, he, I think, will not be found wanting, but will be a bright jewel in that day "when I make up my jewels." He was gone beyond the touch of care and suffering, and his end was one of peace, and his death a painless one. Where death is, agony is not ; it is one of misery's cures, and it is the thought of death that is terrible, not death itself. It is one of the ordinances of nature, and like its other ordinances, is directed by beneficent hands to beneficent ends.

William took possession of poor Reuben's little cottage, at his own request, and proved a very valuable workman ; but I never expected to find another servant as true and faithful as old Reuben had been. There were few like him in the world, I thought, and so it proved.



CHAPTER XIV.

MY DREAM."

HRISTMAS came again, with its cold and frost, and the snow had thrown a white covering over all in the outer world, making the earth look very beautiful. And outside I could hear the twitter of a tiny robin, as he sat perched on a bough of a leafless tree, looking at me with his bright black eye, and waiting for the few crumbs I generally threw out of my window of a morning.

Mrs. Wardle had decorated the parlour

with bunches of evergreens, and bright red berries were prettily intermingled in the foliage, and everything wore a festive appearance except myself—I alone felt dull and desolate. So I thought I would have a Christmas-tree, and the poor women in the village should come and bring their little ones with them, and I would cover the tree with useful little things for them; for as long as I was employed my loneliness did not weigh upon me so heavily.

I drove over to Longdone, the nearest town to us, and purchased several hampers of good things for my tree; and got toys for the little ones, together with little woollen socks—warm boots and shoes for the mothers, and several pieces of warm material for dresses for each one—and several bright-looking shawls for the old women. And feeling well-satisfied with my day's purchases, I drove back home, with a

lighter heart than I had had for many a day.

I decided to have my little gathering in the hall of our house, for it was roomy, and longer than any room we had. So it was all arranged very much to my satisfaction, and also to the satisfaction of the old housekeeper, who declared it did her heart good to see me take so much interest in the work of preparing for my poor people, who were all to come on the morrow.

Christmas was always a melancholy time for me now, for it was at that season of the year my brother died ; and I was just thinking over the subject, when Mrs. Wardle came to consult me about a few final arrangements for the morrow ; and after telling her what I wished to have done, and myself tying the last pair of socks on the tree, I retired to rest. And,

in the night I had a most singular dream, which was so vividly impressed on my memory when I awoke the next morning, that, try how I would, I could not shake it off. And this is what I dreamt :—

I thought it was nearly dark, and that I was in the park. Not a sound broke the stillness around me ; and I seemed to be borne along over the ground without touching it with my feet. How I came to be there I know not, but I was not alone, another figure being present—whether man or woman I could not tell, for it was enveloped in a peculiar long dark robe, and neither spoke a word. There was nothing visible, except its neck, and across that was a cut, and I fancied I could see blood slowly dripping. A peculiar light flashed across our path occasionally, but where it proceeded from I could not discover.

We kept moving on, and paused not

until we came to the monument in the park, which stands upon an eminence, and may be seen for miles round.

My companion then spoke to me, I thought, and I remember noticing the low, sad voice, as it fell upon my ear in the still night air ; and this is what he said to me—

“ I am your father’s victim,” he began, “ and by his hand I fell. Perhaps it was a just punishment for my sin—for I have sinned, as well as he,” he went on, as if communing with himself. “ Look on the side of the monument facing the east,” he commanded, “ and you will find a loose stone in the basement. Examine it carefully, take it out, and you will find a box, and that contains the history of how I sinned, and in what way.

“ Your mother was my first and only love, and I ceased not to love her when she

became your father's wife; and I am he who forced her to call me her brother, threatening I would communicate her secret to her husband, for she loved me at the time of her marriage, and her father sold her for gold to the rich English baronet. I am Stephano," he went on—"I am he whom your father murdered—but I must leave you now, for I cannot longer remain by your side." And so saying, he vanished from my sight, and I was left standing alone by the monument.

I thought I sat down on the cold earth, quite stunned by what my strange companion had told me. Presently I seemed to feel the wind blowing in gusts upon me, and rousing myself, I thought I got up and went to the side of the monument facing the east. I found the loose stone, and examined it, as I had been told to do, and there I found in the space left uncovered,

a square box. I thought a light shone into the hole where the box was secreted, but where it proceeded from I could not tell. Afterwards I replaced the stone, I thought, carrying the box away with me, and the light shone with renewed brilliancy, lighting up the spot where I stood, like mid-day.

All this I saw in my dream, exactly as I relate it; and I seemed to know how to open the box, the lid of which immediately flew back, disclosing a roll of papers inside. I was just taking them out, when the light which throughout my search had shone around me, faded away, and I was left in the inky darkness. All at once, I found myself moving swiftly and silently over the ground, back to the village—but still I did not seem to touch the earth—I flew on, and on, until I came to the gates leading up to the drive, which flew open of

themselves, and I passed through. And I remember no more until I awoke, on the morning of Christmas-day.

I lay still some time, thinking over my dream. I was not a believer in dreams; for what were they, I asked myself,—“thoughts in sleep?” or, as some say, “dreams are only shadows?” but there cannot be shadows without substances. And thus it was I reasoned with myself; and I thought of some lines I had seen somewhere, and which were as follows:—

“O whence are dreams—those airy things,
That solace the weary heart?
They come from heaven on angels' wings,
At the world's cold breath they part.”

Instead of solacing my weary heart, they troubled me; and my dream of the night before weighed heavily upon my mind, that bright Christmas-morning. I tried not to think of it, but all to no pur-

pose; and as I sat musing over it, the sweet tones of the church bells came floating to me, seeming so joyous, as if they were welcoming Christmas once again. I went to the morning service, and afterwards to the vicarage, where I remained until the evening; and that was how I spent my second Christmas-day in this, the story of my life.

After six, my visitors began to arrive. Healthy mothers, with still healthier babies, came trooping into the hall, until there was scarcely standing-room, and I began to fear I had not provided gifts sufficient for so many. At last they were all there, and then the business of the evening commenced.

First, they had tea and cakes—and oranges were distributed among the little ones—and then they each received the different gifts provided for them; and

highly delighted the poor women were, at the bright warm shawls and dresses. The children, too, danced with delight, when their toys were handed to them by the no less delighted old housekeeper. The children then sang several carols, and after each had had more plum-cake they went away, seeming highly to appreciate the evening's amusement.

The next morning I received a letter from Bella, urging me to go and stay some time with them, so I wrote and told her she might expect me early in January. But I had more sorrow to pass through before that visit to Fordhan took place ; and another mystery to unravel.

“When,” thought I, “will my troubles cease, and when shall I have rest?” But there was no rest for me, and none to comfort me in my coming perplexities.



CHAPTER XV.

WHAT I FOUND IN THE LITTLE BLACK BOX.

JANUARY came in bleak and cold, and everything without looked cheerless and miserable, but within all was snug and comfortable.

I always dreaded the winter season of the year, and revered nature in its summer form. Trees, flowers, birds, and the glorious sky on a fine summer evening, were to me the most beautiful things on this beautiful earth.

The time was fast approaching for my

visit to Fordhan, and I looked forward with great delight to seeing Edmund and Bella again.

I felt perfectly satisfied in leaving the house in Mrs. Wardle's care, knowing how well she took care of it and me; for with her I made no pretence of having a will of my own, as far as she was concerned, and she did just what seemed best in her own eyes with everything connected with household affairs. She enjoyed her quiet life, and, with the freedom of an old servant, often expostulated with me on the quiet life I led.

"Why don't you go out more, Miss Dora?" she was continually asking. "You look so white," she would add, "its quite a load on my mind, seeing you look so unwell, and not knowing how to bring the roses back to your cheeks; but I hope Master Edmund will take care of you, and

send you back stronger." And after a conversation of this kind the dear old soul would pet me, and dose me at intervals during the day with beef tea, jelly, and many other things, until at last I declared I could swallow no more. Then she would leave me in peace for that day, but only to repeat the same process on the morrow.

My few arrangements were nearly completed for leaving home, when unforeseen events intervened, which caused me to postpone my visit until months later in the year, and instead of going to Fordhan in January, it was June before I found myself there.

It was the morning of the 11th of January, and the 16th was the day I had fixed upon for leaving home. I had promised to go and see an old woman who was confined to her bed with rheumatism, before leaving, and so immediately

after breakfast I put on my hat and cloak, and filling a little basket with a few things I thought she would like, I started on my errand, "Nep" being my only companion, and feeling cheered at the prospect of the little change my visit to Fordhan would occasion in my quiet life at Trenthaven.

That morning the weather was much finer than it had been of late, and after seeing the old woman, I thought I would extend my walk a little further; and accordingly I turned my steps in the direction of the park—my thoughts full of my coming visit, and of the work I would do on my return home—when turning a sharp corner, the monument was the first object my eyes rested upon, and suddenly the memory of my dream rushed upon me—every incident returning with renewed force to my excited imagination, in all their horrifying distinctness.

Again I seemed to be moving over the ground, as if impelled forward by some invisible power, and I almost fancied that mysterious figure was by my side; and notwithstanding the feeling of faintness which gradually came over me, as these thoughts rushed through my mind, I still felt myself urged forward, and did not pause in my hurried walk, until I found myself standing opposite the monument; which having reached, I was obliged to sit down and rest, for I felt convinced, that soon my dream would be realized. I was not naturally superstitious, but that strange dream had quite unnerved me—quite taken possession of me for the time being—and after resting a short time, I was too excited to sit still long, I rose, and walked round the monument to the side facing the east. I was quite alone, no human creature was in sight; and after looking carefully

round to see that I was not deceiving myself in thinking I was the only creature there, I stooped down and examined every inch of the basement of the monument in the side facing the east. At first I could distinguish nothing differing from the other sides of the monument, but not feeling inclined to give up my search lightly, I again went down on my knees, and could I believe the evidence of my senses? yes, for there, on the east side, I saw the loose stone, just as I had seen it in my dream.

My heart palpitated so fast I could scarcely breathe, and with trembling fingers I touched the stone. It moved! and using a little strength, I lifted it out easily from its resting place. My wonderment knew no bounds, but before proceeding any further, I was again compelled to sit down and rest, which I did on a fallen tree lying close by, and which had been torn up by

the roots during the recent gale we had had.

I knew my dream was being fulfilled, and that the box was there—hidden in the basement of the monument ; and I felt I could never more say, that I did not believe in dreams.

It is almost needless to say, that I found the little black box shown to me by that mysterious figure in my dream, and as I lifted it out of its place of concealment I could hardly believe I was awake, and not dreaming ; still I replaced the stone, which was so ingeniously contrived to fit into its place, that no casual observer could possibly detect it was anything but one solid block of stone.

The mysterious companion who kept by my side in my dream I dared not think about, for the low sad voice still seemed to be ringing in my ears and I seemed

still to feel its presence near me, and hugging the little black box closer to me I hurried back home, and thankful I was to get there. I went into my comfortable sitting room and hastily swallowed some wine, and after placing the box in a locked chest in my room I did not open it that night. A dreadful head-ache coming on I had no alternative but to go to bed and rest. Hours passed away, and still I lay, racked with pain, sleep refusing to come to my weary eyes. Two sounded from the clock in the hall below, then I heard the hour of three strike, and I remember no more. I slept, and did not waken until nearly noon on the following day.

Mrs. Wardle had been very uneasy, she told me, when she found how long I had been sleeping, but feared to disturb me, thinking the rest would be good for me. She acted wisely, and I awoke from

my long sleep refreshed both in body and mind.

No going away from home for me until I had cleared up all this new mystery, and vanished the dreadful doubts which beset me on every side, so I resolved to postpone my visit for a while.

On the evening of the thirteenth I had a fire made in my dressing room, and telling Mrs. Wardle not to let anyone disturb me that night, I drew out the little black box from its hiding-place, and began my examination of its mysterious contents.

It opened easily (as I had seen it do in my dream), and was made of some brightly-polished black wood, and was of foreign workmanship. In the box were some neatly folded papers. It was about seven inches square, and very light, and the papers were sealed at both ends and folded square to fit in the box, and on the

outer cover, written in bold characters, were these words :—

“ Whoever finds this box of papers will be fulfilling a dead man’s desire if he will carry it to Miss Temley, of The Limes, at Trenthaven, in the county of S——shire. Should the finder not succeed in finding her, this box must be destroyed—burned, as its contents concern only her for whom it is intended.”

For what purpose had the papers been hidden, I paused to think, and who had placed them in the hole in the monument ? These questions, however, I could not answer ; and then was I thankful for my dream, and that these papers had so providentially fallen into my hands, for they were evidently intended for my perusal alone. I then unfolded the closely packed sheets and saw they were covered with close writing, and a woman’s writing too,

the letters were lady-like and delicately formed, and seemed strangely familiar to me. I began to read as follows :—

“ These papers are to be given to my daughter Dora by Stephano Parati after my death, if he should survive me.

“ ELLA TEMLEY.”

And turning over the leaf, I read on :—

“ My daughter, I am going to tell you the story of my unhappy life, how I came to marry your father, and leave my own beautiful, sunny country to come and live in dreary, cold England.

“ My father was an artist and had a greed for gold. I was happy in the love of one I had known from my youth, and who loved me in return, his name was Stephano Parati. He was an artist also, but he was not so poor as we were ; and one day, ah, shall I ever forget that day ? *he* confessed

his love for me ; it was the happiest day in my life.

“All went well until I was eighteen, when your father came to Italy in his travels, and one day he saw me. From that hour my sorrow began, for my father seeing the rich English signor’s admiration for his Ella, and thinking he was richer than Stephano, my lover, he forbade my ever meeting him again, and would not permit me to speak or write to him, but I never ceased to love him—he was my first and only love ; and in despair of ever gaining me for his own, he took to wild ways, and at last got mixed up in a tavern brawl, and to save his life he had to leave Italy, but not before we had met secretly and had one last embrace. After a few months had gone by he returned again, and we met often afterwards, but at last my father’s suspicions were aroused, and one dark

night he followed me and witnessed our meeting.

“His anger was terrible, and my heart almost broke in the struggle to promise never again to meet Stephano.

“My father again began urging me to marry the handsome English stranger, and at last I consented, and we were married ; and then I was told I had been sold for gold. My heart was bitter towards my father and my husband afterwards, and I loved my Stephano more passionately than ever ; and when my boy was born my heart did not soften towards his father, but still yearned for my first and only love.

“When he parted from me he swore never to give me up, and he continued to follow us about from place to place ; and I did not see my husband’s English home until after you, my little daughter, were born. Then my heart yearned towards

my husband, and I learned to love him. But still Stephano continued his persecutions of me—for now that I loved my husband, Stephano's presence was distasteful to me—and I have gone down on my knees to him, and begged him to go away from England, and never to try to see me more.

“He was of a very passionate nature, as are most Italians, and in order not to excite your father's suspicions, I called him my brother, in a letter I wrote soon after coming to England and always kept by me, fearing Stephano's visits might be discovered. It was not needed, however; and the last time I saw him was about ten years ago, and I sometimes think he is dead—gone to that long home.

“I gave him a large sum of money, and he in return promised me he would go back to Italy, and persecute me no more.

“ At first, when he came here, I used to meet him in the shrubbery ; but I grew nervous at times, and at last dared not go there any more.

“ In his rambles he discovered a loose stone in the basement of that monument which stands in the park, and there he used to secrete his letters to me, and place the notices of his arrival.

“ Many a time when you, my child, were fast asleep, has your unhappy mother been entreating him to go and leave her in peace ; and finally he would go away, leaving me in the chill night air, gnashing my teeth in despair, not knowing what to do or whither to turn in my distress, for I feared the consequences, should your father discover anything.

“ This letter I shall place in the hole in the monument for I know he will come back again, and then, should I not be here

when he comes, this he will place in your hands ; and you, my child must keep your mother's secret, for this is my last request. Stephano too, I feel will not betray me, for now he is rich and powerful, and no longer wants pecuniary assistance.

“ I have long suffered from heart disease, and know that any sudden excitement will end my days here on earth. God knows how much I now love my husband, and that I have ever been a true and faithful wife to him. Of late he has changed towards me, and I often fear that he knows my secret ; but God knows I love him now, if I did not at first ; and his neglect is killing me. His love, now, is the only love I care for ; and if I should die before my Dora, then this will be left for her, and she can then see how her mother suffered.

“ It may be years before you see these

lines, my child, and your father may have taught you to think harshly of your poor suffering mother; but only to you, my daughter, have I laid bare my sorrowful heart—sorrowful, not from any fault of mine, but from the coldness and distrust your father has of late shown towards me; I see it now, and have seen it for months.

“ I feel I cannot long remain a tenant of this beautiful world—my heart palpitates strangely now as I write—but I must finish this my last and only letter to you, and once more crawl through the park to the monument, there to place this in keeping for my Dora; and I pray God, in His infinite mercy, will watch over you, and guard you from all harm, and keep you under his ever watchful care when your mother is taken away to a brighter home, ‘Where there are no tears, and trouble cannot enter in.’

“Most of our family have died young, and always without warning, and I feel my end will be like theirs. I feel the palpitation growing worse, and I must close this letter now; but think of your mother as one whose life was not all unhappiness, and whose greatest earthly treasures were her husband and her children.

“You may be a woman when you see these lines, written by your mother, lying cold and still in her grave, and who prays that her daughter may be shielded from the cold usage of the world, and never know the trouble her mother has experienced.

“An hour hence these papers will be concealed in Stephano’s hiding-place, and there remain until he returns. Should he not return they will rot away, and probably never be discovered at all.

“And now, having pressed one long,

last kiss upon your brow, I go to secrete these, my last words—for I feel they may be the last—to you, my darling Dora.

“From your devoted mother,

“ELLA TEMLEY.”

Those were the last words my mother wrote, and the letter my father found must have been the one written years ago, but doubtless in his agitation he did not notice the date, if there was any date upon it.

I had heard several remarks at different times from those about me, when they imagined I was taking no notice of their conversation. I had once heard Mrs. Wardle say, “Ah, ’tis a pity master was not fonder of his lady,” and I had wondered at the time who she was talking about, but children soon forget trifles in the many things they have to amuse them. Now the words came to my memory, and I

at once knew it was of my unhappy mother she was speaking—my poor persecuted mother. How I wished my father had been alive, then I would have cleared her from any thought of wrong towards him, by producing these papers, and convinced him that all his wrongful suspicions were without foundation. Both now were dead and gone, and I could do nothing.

I dried my eyes, for tears had fallen plenteously during my perusal of the papers, the contents of which had been written by the hand of the dead. I bathed my face, and after destroying the box and all it contained, I went down to the house-keeper and gave orders for the study to be well cleaned and the carpets taken away, as I had bought new ones and was going to have the room altered. She seemed surprised, and looked at me as if she thought my mind deranged, but finding I

was in full possession of all my faculties, she curtsied in her usually respectful manner, and I then retired for the night.

I decided not to mention my mother's trouble to my brother, now Sir Edmund Temley, for he succeeded to the title upon the death of his father, and neither would I tell him of that singular dream I had had; and I lay down to rest with these thoughts surging in my mind, and quite overcome with grief at the thought of my dear mother's sad life. The burden of my thoughts was too much for me in my delicate state of health, both of mind and body, and crying "Oh, heaven, what have I done to have such a trial sent me?" and bitter, rebellious feelings rising tumultuously within me, I fell back insensible. A long illness followed, and oh, how I longed to die and join my mother, but God willed it otherwise, and I gradually recovered.

But time softens all things, and the deepest grief will grow less bitter under his tender healing, and I slowly began to gather health and strength again to begin life afresh.

It was a severe struggle, but I conquered, and Heaven helped me and shewed me, that purified by suffering we should still struggle on to the end.

Bella was with me through the greater part of my illness, and it was decided that as soon as I could travel I was to go to them and remain until my health was fully restored. Edmund seemed perfectly happy, and would not leave me until fully assured by the good doctor that I was in the right way for recovery.

Change of scene and air were recommended for me, and old doctor Forbes, patting me kindly on the head, as I lay on the couch, near an open window, looking

over the lawn, said, "My dear, you must get away as soon as possible, your mind wants ease as well as your body."

I thanked him for his advice and gave myself entirely into the housekeeper's care, who persisted in fussing about me and declaring that as soon as Miss Dora could walk she'd see how long she was getting rid of her; leave it in her hands. And so I left it.





CHAPTER XVI.

MY VISIT.

IT was a lovely Sunday in June, and the first time since my illness that I had been to church. I had just seated myself, when my attention was attracted towards the reading-desk by hearing a strange voice giving out the hymn. Strange to me, but still it did not seem unfamiliar, and yet I could not remember where I had last heard it; so when all rose for the purpose of joining in the morning hymn of praise, I turned to see who the strange voice proceeded from.

Very much to my astonishment, my eyes met those of Alfred Claremont, looking strong and handsome—not altered in the least; and several times during the morning I could not help stealing a glance at him, and, rapturously drunk in the tale of love and tenderness his dark eyes told to me, in that one earnest glance at the commencement of the service.

I felt certain he loved me, and I walked home with a strange, new, glad feeling at my heart, for long ago I had given my love to Alfred Claremont, freely and entirely.

Our dear old Vicar's health was failing fast, and it had become evident to all that we should have to look out for another in the place of the good old man, who had led such a life as all God's ministers ought to lead.

He would be missed in every house in

the village; and as each Sunday drew near his voice seemed to grow fainter and weaker, and his breathing more laborious. Asthma was his complaint, and it was most distressing to see him struggling up the path to the church on those cold mornings during the past winter.

One day some one suggested to him that he should have a curate to help him in his duties.

But, "No," he said, "as long as I can see, and have a voice wherewith to make myself heard, I will do the work the Lord has given me to do." And so it seemed he meant to do his duty to the end.

I was always glad to see his dear old face, and he always had a kind word for me.

I was busy with my packing on the Monday morning, putting a few presents for Bella carefully away, and had just paused to take breath, when I heard a

loud knock at the hall door (bells we had none), and presently Thomas came in to tell me that Mr. Claremont was in the morning room.

How my heart beat at the sound of his name; and giving a hasty glance at myself in the glass (which was perfectly natural my readers will say), and snatching a bright scarlet geranium out of a vase close by, I made my way, in a rather undignified manner I'm afraid, into the morning room.

My visitor was busily engaged turning over some rare prints at the other end of the room when I entered, and did not hear my approach until I stood close to him; then turning round to get nearer the light, he became aware for the first time of my presence.

I seemed to forget all I had gone through in the last two years, in the joy at seeing

him again ; and even that last trouble seemed fading away at the sight of his familiar face—that dark trouble which had so clouded my young and, should have been, happy life.

I could see no change in him, when he looked at me, as he did then, gravely, with the old look—but half of it affection, and I fancied the other half was wonderment—in his eyes.

Did he notice that I had lost some of that miserable, anxious expression I used to wear, and that I looked happier (I felt it) than I had for now nearly three years ? I thought he did, as he took both my hands in his firm, warm clasp, and said—

“ So long since we have met ; have you forgotten me, Dora ?—Miss Dora,” he corrected himself.

“ I never forget my friends, and those I esteem,” I answered.

“I am your friend, then,” said he, “only your friend—nothing more?”

“I don’t understand you,” I faltered, feeling my face was becoming uncomfortably warm, and managed to get one hand away so as to shield it.

“I will not frighten you,” said he; “and now tell me how you have been all this long time—have you been ill?” This was asked anxiously; and again taking my hand in his, he held it fast until my tale was told. He had heard of poor papa’s sad end, and how Edmund and Bella were married; and when I told him how ill I had been, his expressions of sympathy were most soothing to my ears.

Then he led me on to talk over my coming visit, and then, after asking if he might call upon me during my stay with my brother, he took his leave.

We had been standing talking in the

morning room, which was shaded from the sun by a large cedar which grew in front of the windows. That was my favourite room, and I thought it the prettiest in the house. Roses and honeysuckles climbed round the windows, which opened out upon the lawn and flower gardens, now sweet with the perfume of hundreds of bright blossoms ; and at those windows I loved to sit in the lovely summer evenings, with my work, or a book, listening to the hum of the bees, and the sweet notes of the birds. In the winter, too, I liked that room ; I could hear the wind mourning through the trees at night, full of melancholy and sadness, as if some troubled spirit could not find rest, shrieking and wailing for what it had not ; but within that cozy little room, all was warmth and comfort.

At last the morning of my departure

drew near, bright and lovely, and many were the directions given me by good old Mrs. Wardle, as to how to take care of myself on my journey.

I was just stepping into the railway carriage, when I saw Mr. Claremont approaching. He politely handed me my dressing bag and umbrella, and begged to be remembered to my brother and his wife, and I thanked him for his kind inquiries and attentions to myself, and had just time to shake hands with him, when the train moved away, leaving him standing on the platform.

Edmund and Bella met me at the station nearest their home, and whilst Edmund saw after the boxes and wraps, Bella and I seated ourselves in the neat little carriage that was awaiting us, and we were driven off towards Fordhan as fast as a splendid pair of grey ponies could take us.

After a drive of about an hour's duration, we came to the pretty little village of Fordhan, and I soon saw the old church standing amid the trees, which was completely covered over with ivy, and I thought the vicarage could not be very far distant; but it was not to the vicarage we were driven, that was partly down and a new one was to replace the old one, and my brother was, for the present, living in a part of the old "Manor House," which had been offered to him by a college friend, to make use of until the new vicarage was completed.

Such a dear old place it was, points and gables at every corner, and like the church, completely covered with ivy, and had the oddest windows, many of which were of stained glass. There was a rookery at the back, and a splendid croquet lawn in front, in fact, room sufficient for half-a-dozen

parties to be playing at the same time. Of course this was only a temporary residence for the Vicar of Fordhan, and Edmund was very grateful to his friend for allowing him the use of his house.

It was built in the Elizabethan style, and was over a hundred years old, Edmund told me. There were many closed rooms in the Manor House, and it had belonged to a very ancient family, who had grown tired of it, and so it was sold to the one who would pay the highest price for it. It now belonged to a Mr. Layton, who was away, travelling in the East, and he had offered it to my brother and his pretty wife, until their own residence should be in readiness for them.

Mr. Layton had not had the Manor House in his possession many years when he offered it to my brother in his absence ; and I looked forward to much enjoyment

in rambling over the old place, and in studying the pictures in the gallery, of which there were some very fine ones, Bella told me.

All her time now was taken up in frilling and embroidering wonderful little garments, dainty frocks of all shades, and tiny white caps.

She expected soon to become a mother, and very proud Edmund appeared to be at the prospect of having a baby boy or girl of his own. He didn't mind which it was, he was always passionately fond of little ones, and the most timid child would usually go instinctively to him, knowing he loved them.





CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE PICTURE GALLERY.

IT was the fourth day of my visit ; Bella and I had just come in from a drive, Edmund was away attending to his parish work, and Bella, feeling rather tired, had gone to lay down until an hour before dinner, when I was to disturb her, if she were asleep.

Now, I thought, I shall have a fine opportunity of going through the picture gallery.

The room struck a cold chill into me as I entered—it was one which had evidently

been closed a long time ; and I passed through that into a still larger one, and which had an unpleasant musty smell. I carefully closed the doors after me, and passed into the picture gallery. All was silent as the grave, and I seemed to hear my own breathing ; so intense was the stillness which reigned around me that I began to feel nervous, for I was still weak from my illness.

The pictures were hung on either side of a long corridor running the whole length of the house ; and some of the pictures were of life size, and very fine.

“How beautiful !” I thought aloud, and I seemed to hear the echo of my own voice at the other end of the gallery, afar off.

I stood entranced before the portrait of a beautiful girl. She could not be more than eighteen, I thought. Her hair

hung in burnished waves below her waist, and one tiny white hand rested upon the huge head of a mastiff, and in the other she held a jewelled riding whip. She had on a blue velvet riding habit, which set off her beautiful figure to perfection.

I stood a long time before that picture, and then moved on to the next ; it was another portrait, but this one had not the same charm for me as the preceding one. It was the portrait of a very benevolent looking old dame, with powdered hair and high ruffs, and on a small table at her side stood a large old-fashioned snuff-box.

Opposite to the last-named was a portrait of a lively old gentleman, with long silvery hair and knee breeches, so I concluded that the two last described must be husband and wife, but not feeling

quite certain on that point, I moved on to the next picture. None had the same interest for me as the young and beautiful girl in the riding habit, and I was glancing over them rather indifferently, I'm afraid, when my eyes rested upon a picture at the extreme end of the gallery. It was the portrait of a boy about eight years old. He was dressed in black velvet, with lace at his wrists and throat, and his hair, which was golden, fell upon his shoulders in thick curls, but it was the eyes that attracted me towards the picture. Large, mournful, dark eyes, with such an unsatisfied longing in them, that they seemed quite to startle me.

The contrast between his eyes and hair were so singular, the eyes black and the hair golden; and I stood looking at that picture a long time, so long that I found upon looking at my watch that it wanted

but half an hour to the usual dinner time, and I at once turned and left the gallery, deciding to come another afternoon and look at those pictures I had not yet seen. On my way out I observed a crimson velvet curtain, reaching from the ceiling to the floor. I had not noticed it before, but perhaps it was instead of a door, I thought, and I drew it aside.

There was no door to be seen, but a glowing face was there, hidden behind that curtain. It was the face of a woman, and evidently had been painted by a master hand. About twenty-five I judged her to be, and it was, without exception, the loveliest face I had ever beheld.

It was such a piquant, striking face, and the hair hung in thick auburn masses around the slight figure, almost completely veiling the lovely neck and soft rounded shoulders. Eyes of the clearest blue

seemed to be laughing back at me from the canvas, and I stood for some moments lost in admiration at the creature before me. It was a perfect picture.

Why was it there ? I wondered, hidden away from everyone's eyes—and still wondering, I replaced the curtain, and hurrying through the different rooms, hardly pausing to close the doors after me, made my way into the room where Bella was still lying, fast asleep. I soon roused her, however, and then hastened away to dress for dinner.

“Have you seen the pictures ?” inquired Edmund, looking across the table at me.

I answered in the affirmative.

“Well, and what do you think of them ? You have done more in your short stay, than I have yet found time to do,” he went on, without waiting for my reply ; “but at some time I mean to devote a day wholly to studying them.”

"Whose property are they?" asked Bella.

"Oh, they all belong to Layton," returned Edmund, "and are, I believe, all family portraits; and there is a history attached to every one of them, he told me. Some day I mean to get him to go through with me, and tell me the stories, which I have no doubt would be very interesting."

"I should like to know the history of one portrait, there," said I, "it is the most beautiful face I ever saw. She must have been lovely," I went on; "and before it hangs a crimson velvet curtain, completely hiding the most superbly handsome woman I ever saw. It's a perfect picture, I think; and I cannot imagine what the motive must be for placing the portrait of so lovely a creature where no eyes can look upon it. I really felt quite

vexed to think that that lovely face should be banished out of sight, behind that hideous curtain ;” and I fear my face must have shown my vexation.

“ I will ask Layton, when he returns, why he hides your favourite up in that fashion, and let you know by telegraph, Dot,” cried Edmund, laughing at my evident vexation over such a trifling matter.

“ When does he return ?” asked Bella.

That my brother knew nothing about ; “ for,” said he, “ Layton’s movements are so uncertain, one never knows when to expect him ; it might be years before he returns to England, and it might be to-morrow. He was always a restless fellow.”

The following morning was wet and damp for the season of the year ; and finding I could not go out, I thought I would pay another visit to the picture-gallery, for as yet I had not seen one-half

of the pictures. So telling Bella where to find me, I took up the keys, and, after unlocking several doors, I went on until I found myself once more opposite to the portrait of the boy which had interested me so strangely the afternoon before. I next saw a group of three figures—a very old man and two children; they did not interest me very much, and it was not long before I found myself in front of the velvet curtain. I drew it on one side, as I had done before, and dragging a large, heavy, old-fashioned chair across the corridor, I seated myself, and gazed for some time at the picture before me. How long I remained in that position I know not, for I felt as if I never could tire of looking at that lovely face. Pretty faces and pretty things always had a very powerful attraction for me, and this was the loveliest I had ever seen in my life.

I tried to imagine her as living and moving, but I was roused from the reverie I had fallen into, by hearing a stifled sob close to my elbow. I started to my feet and glanced hurriedly around, but failed to discover any living object, and thinking I must be mistaken, I re-seated myself, and my thoughts again reverting to the picture before me, I had almost forgotten the circumstance, when again I heard the sound of smothered sobbing.

It seemed closer than before, but I could see nothing; and now, feeling certain I could not be mistaken a second time, I examined the panneling, thinking perhaps there was a door concealed somewhere, but failed to discover anything of the kind. I rapped the walls with my knuckles, but could discover nothing at all, and not caring to remain there any longer, with those mysterious sounds round me, I made

my way back to the inhabited part of the house, feeling strangely impressed by hearing those strange smothered sobs so close to me, but not knowing from whence they proceeded—"so near and yet so far away," I could not at all understand the meaning of them.

I did not mention the circumstance to Edmund, for he would perhaps laugh at me, and tell me I was fanciful; but I was none the less convinced in my own mind that it was suppressed sobbing I had heard in the gallery; and I determined to go again and search for myself, to try and discover the meaning of those extraordinary noises, and satisfy myself; and so thinking, I went into the breakfast room to Bella, and busied myself in helping her with some sewing until luncheon time.

In the afternoon Bella and I were just taking our afternoon tea, when Mr. Clare-

mont was announced, and he was immediately followed by Edmund, who came in tired from a long round of parish work. Both gladly accepted a cup of tea, and by the time it was finished I had got over my astonishment at the sight of Alfred Claremont. Here I had only been away from home four days, and on the fifth he had had the audacity to present himself at the Manor House.

The conversation was going on briskly, when some one mentioned Mr. Layton's name.

Mr. Claremont asked me if I had seen him, but of course I replied in the negative; and, he knowing how few strangers I ever saw, I wondered at the time that he should ask me the question.

"He's the handsomest man I ever saw," said Edmund, "and one of the best hearted fellows. Do you know him, Claremont?"

“Yes, very well ! His youngest brother was at Oxford when I was there, and I went home with him one vacation, and stayed until our holidays were over, and we both returned to college together ; but his elder brother, the one you know, and to whom this place belongs, has had some great trouble, but what it is no one knows but himself, I think, for he’s very reserved and takes no one into his confidence.”

“I always thought he seemed melancholy,” remarked Edmund, “but it is awfully kind of him to offer us the use of his house, during the building of our own. Don’t you think so, old fellow ?”

“Yes, it was very kind of him, but his brother is just the same easy, good-natured young fellow,” Alfred Claremont returned, “but where did you say Frank Layton was gone ?”

“For a year’s travelling in the East,

somewhere," replied Edmund, and rising he took his hat and went off for another hour's work in his parish, telling us not to wait dinner for him, as he might be detained until late in the evening.





CHAPTER XVIII.

BEFORE THE EARLY DAWN.



I HAD been over a week at Fordhan, and had not given Alfred Claremont the opportunity of saying those words I knew he was longing to say to me, and which, I thought, were better left unsaid.

I had not yet forgotten my life's sorrow, and my father's terrible end, and I could not reconcile myself to marrying Alfred Claremont, with the knowledge of the disgrace that would become attached to my name, should the cause of my father's death ever become known to the world.

I felt I could not reconcile myself to

marry any one knowing my own disgrace, and though they never knew it, I could not link my sad life with another's.

Many a tearful hour I spent in my bedroom, and Edmund and Bella could not understand my reasons for secluding myself each time Mr. Claremont made his appearance.

I dreaded being left alone with him, for well I knew what would follow, and I began to wish he would leave off coming to Fordhan so much, for every time he came and I saw him, it only made it all the harder for me to try not to think of him in any other light than that of a friend; and as often as I saw him coming up the path to the house, it was the signal for me to rush up into my room, and there I remained until he took his departure.

"Now," I thought, "has the hardest life begun; I must give

thinking about him ;” for I knew he only waited a fitting opportunity to ask me to become his wife, and my heart raged in strong conflict with my reason.

I might perhaps be happy once again with such love as his, I thought, but I resolved that from the great love I bore him, I would leave him no opportunity for declaring himself, and live on as I had been doing, alone, and with nothing to cheer me but the memory of his love for me, in the happy, few happy days now past away for ever.

He had spoken to my brother, Bella told me, and she urged me to listen to him myself, but no, my mind was quite made, and I resolved never to marry. I must live out my years alone.

These thoughts were very hard for me to have to bear, and very bitter, but nothing should alter my determination.

I had more than sufficient to keep on the house with my own income alone, and I decided soon to return home, and there end my days in the home of my childhood.

I had nothing bright or joyous to look forward to in my future, and the more I saw of Alfred Claremont the harder I felt it would be for me to give him up, and at the end of the fortnight, the time fixed for the duration of my stay at Fordhan, I decided to return to Trenthaven.

The weather was charming, and at breakfast Edmund suggested that Bella and I should go out for a drive, and asked us to call upon a lady parishioner of his at the other end of the parish, and we were just leaving the room to dress for our drive, when suddenly the sky, which a few moments before had been clear and beautiful, became dark and clouded, and it soon became very evident we were going to have

a severe thunderstorm, so we were compelled to abandon our drive for that morning.

“Come into the picture gallery, Bella,” I said, “it will be a pleasant way of passing an hour until luncheon time.”

She agreed it would be a nice pastime; and as she had not yet seen the pictures herself, she most readily acquiesced to my proposal to go at once and examine those in the gallery.

“For you know, dear,” she resumed, “we have not been half over the house; and all the rooms on the west side are locked, but there is a secret door in the gallery, somewhere, and Edmund says it leads right through those rooms on the western side of the house. That is the uninhabited part you know; I didn’t trouble to go over it, for we have more rooms than we require, and are very comfortable.”

“Do you know where to find that door?” I asked.

“No,” she made reply, “Mr. Layton did not point its exact position out to Edmund, for I was not here at the time he went over that portion of the house, or I think I should have been curious enough to ask Mr. Layton to point out that secret to me.”

During the foregoing conversation we had been making our way through the different rooms into the picture gallery, the carved panels of which were blackened with age; and I determined to come again, and alone, and try and discover that secret door, and examine those closed rooms, for that smothered sobbing still rang in my ears; and “who knows,” thought I “what there is concealed in that west wing, the doors of which were so securly locked, and the keys removed.”

Bella duly admired the paintings, but she thought the boy's portrait superior to my favourite with the lovely face, and which, for some mysterious reason, was kept hidden behind that velvet curtain.

We lingered there the whole morning, and when we turned to leave the gallery it was luncheon time. The sun had broken through the clouds, and was now streaming down upon us through the handsome stained glass windows, and on to the faces looking down upon us from their gilded frames, and seeming almost to endue them with life. The afternoon we spent in driving about, and returned to the Manor House just in time to dress for dinner.

My bed room was a curious old room, lighted at one end by an oriel window, and with dark polished oak panels round the room, closely resembling the wainscotting in the picture gallery. Two doors opened

into it ; one leading into a long passage at the extreme end of which was a very beautiful stained glass window, and the other door was locked on the outside, so I did not know where that led to. I retired to rest a little after eleven, on the first night of my second week at Fordhan, and soon I must begin to think of returning home to Trenthaven. I was generally a good sleeper, and did not burn any lights in my chamber ; but just as dawn was breaking the following morning, I was disturbed by a slight sound somewhere, but so slight, that after lying listening for a short time, and finding it was not repeated, I thought I must have been dreaming, and composed myself for sleep again. How long I lay, I know not, but gradually I became conscious of something moving in my room.

I did not move, but lay quite still, and

listened ; I again heard the sound as of some one opening a door, and waited for what would follow.

The light was barely sufficient for me to distinguish the different objects in the room, and all at once I heard a sob close to my bed.

I sprung up in a sitting posture, and drew aside the heavy curtain, and there in the dim light, looking at me with those same sad entreating eyes, was the figure of a boy, the same whose portrait I saw in the gallery, and which had so singularly interested me.

I rubbed my eyes, fancying I must be dreaming, but still he stood there. I strove to speak but could not, my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth ; and he—after giving one more eager searching look at me—threw up his little arms and cried out, “No, that is not my mamma, that is

not my mamma." And to my excited imagination, he seemed to glide out of my sight into the darkness, and through an opening in the wall.

There was no more sleep for me after that, and as soon as I had sufficiently recovered myself for the exertion of dressing, I got up and endeavoured to find out how the boy had gained admission into the room.

I tried the door, which I have before said was locked, and shook it several times, but it was firm as a rock, and it was by that way I concluded the boy must have come.

Here was a mystery ! "Who was the boy, and why was he hidden out of sight in that strange way ?"

The more I thought over the subject the more mystified I became, and I decided not to say anything to any one about my vision

of the morning, but to try to elucidate the mystery by my own unaided efforts.

If I could only discover that door in the picture gallery, I had no doubt that I should soon get the key to the whole of what was so perplexing to me.

“Was he a relation of Mr. Layton’s,” I inquired of myself, and if so, “why did he wish to conceal the child’s existence?”

Edmund and Bella, I felt certain knew nothing about the matter; and I again resolved to keep my own counsel, and begin my investigations myself at once.

Accordingly, I astonished my brother and Bella by announcing my intention of remaining with them another week.

They both expressed their pleasure at my deciding to stay longer with them, and after breakfast, seeing that Bella was engaged with her sewing, and Edmund away at his parish work, I strolled off to the

picture gallery, bent on finding the secret door in the wall.

I stood a few minutes looking at the boy's portrait, and was still further convinced that that was a likeness of the poor little fellow who had found his way into my room in the dawn, and thought over his words, as he stood looking at me. "No, that is not my mamma, that is not my mamma," he had cried out in his sad childish voice. Was it his mother he was looking for, and why had she left him ?

No answer could I find to these questions, as they presented themselves to my mind; that there was something wrong concealed in the west wing I seemed intuitively to feel, and I hoped to be the one to set it right by my own unaided exertions; and whether or not I was successful, the next chapter will show to my readers.



CHAPTER XIX.

"FACE TO FACE."



DID not discover the object of my search in my two first visits to the gallery: and I had not been well for the last few days, and so, for a time my self-imposed task had to be abandoned. Now that I was well again, I determined to go on with my search, and not to give up until I had satisfied myself as to the whereabouts of the secret door, and what was beyond it; and, by *fide et fiducia*, to endeavour to comfort that poor lonely little boy, in

whose eyes I could read unmistakable signs of suffering.

Two days passed away before I had an opportunity of again visiting the gallery, but on the third morning, Edmund and Bella both went out for the day only, to the next country vicarage. They drove over, and as the June evenings were now so lovely, they were to drive back in the cool of the evening; and I was for that one day left to my own resources.

Bella laughingly gave me her tiny bunch of keys as she was leaving, and said, "Now, Dora, if you should happen to have any visitors in our absence, mind you entertain them well."

She took an active part in her household matters, and her title of "lady" did not hinder her from being her own house-keeper.

I assured her, that whoever favoured me

with their company in her absence, they should not leave dissatisfied with any inattention on my part; and accompanying her to the door, I saw her comfortably seated, and the next moment Edmund was whipping up his ponies, and they disappeared down the drive.

This was an excellent opportunity for exploring the picture gallery, I thought. All had happened as I desired, and I lost no time in making my way to the picture gallery. The deserted rooms looked still more dismal, in contrast with the bright sunshine outside, and they seemed to chill me through and through as I traversed them, and I was not sorry when I reached the last door, and, unlocking it, found myself once more in the gallery, surrounded by Mr. Layton's ancestors.

I searched a long time without any apparent success, and had begun to feel

somewhat dispirited. I drew the crimson curtain on one side, and was standing leaning against the woodwork, admiring the picture opposite, when, suddenly, I felt the panel against which I was leaning, tremble and shake behind me.

I turned quickly round, and minutely examined every inch of the frame-work, which was carved in a floral pattern.

Every panel had a different centre-piece, but the bordering was of the same pattern round each panel.

I rapped that particular panel I had felt shaking behind me, and fancied it sent forth a hollow sound—and once more I proceeded to examine every leaf and bud in the carving.

At last I found what I sought. My eyes had discovered a bud carved in the border, but which was of a lighter shade than any other flower in the panel. I eagerly

pressed it, and the whole of my body felt numbed, and my brain stupified with the intense excitement I was labouring under.

As I pressed the bud once more, harder than at first, the secret door flew open, and I looked into a long, narrow passage, which was carpeted, and looked as if in regular use.

I entered the passage, without hesitation, and saw it was lighted by a window high up in the roof. All was silent as the grave, and I began to feel rather nervous, and to wish I had not ventured alone; but summoning up my courage, I determined to proceed, and not to turn back.

I went on through the narrow passage, and found myself in a square hall, or chamber, the ceiling of which was carved in wood; groups of angels were in the centre, and they were holding shields before their breasts, and an eagle was placed

at each of the corners. To me, all this seemed very curious, for I had never seen anything of the kind before. It was a very spacious room or hall, and was lighted on one side by stained glass windows ; and huge carved oak chairs were placed round at different intervals, the seats of which had once been covered over with crimson velvet, but now that was all faded, and the chairs had become rickety with old age. Several doors opened out of the hall, and I felt curious to know what the rooms were like beyond those closed doors, and I tried to open the one nearest to me, but it was locked ; I then went on to the next, but with the same result.

Feeling very much disappointed at finding the doors fastened, I crossed over the hall to another door, smaller than any other, and I turned the handle. It yielded to my touch, and I saw a flight of several

steps. Down these I went, without hesitation ; and continuing on, through another narrow passage, I found myself opposite to a door covered with crimson cloth, and studded round with brass nails.

My curiosity was now at its height, and giving the door a gentle push, I found myself in a circular chamber, which was furnished with great taste. Everything in this room was of modern workmanship, and the curtains and furniture were of a pale blue, with a carpet to match ; but it was still and silent as the rest of the rooms were.

I sat down upon one of the chairs, and presently I caught sight of a curtain drawn over a doorway in one part of the room. I concluded that must be another outlet, and hastily drawing it on one side, I saw several steps. Down these I went, as I had the others, and came to another

door covered with crimson cloth, like the one in the room I had just left. I threw it open, and there, face to face, I stood with the poor little fellow whose portrait had interested me so strangely on my first visit to the picture gallery.

Yes, it was he ; the same dark, longing eyes, and long, golden hair, and his dress was the same—black velvet, and lace at his wrists and throat.

Neither of us spoke for some seconds, but at last he said, "You are not my mamma; why do you come here? Papa said I must never speak to anyone but nurse. Go away," he entreated, "please go away, for she will be back soon."

"Who is your papa, dear?" I inquired.

"My papa is a tall man—taller than you," he replied, "and he's always cross with me now; but O! I want my mamma, I want my mamma!" he wailed, and fell

down on a low stool and began to sob and cry as if his little heart would break.

Where was his mother, I wondered, and why was he hidden away there, without his parents, and only a nurse for his companion? I will question him, I decided, and drawing my chair nearer to him, I said—

“Come to me, and tell me where to find your mamma.”

He rose up and placed his little feverish hand in mine, and looking at me through his tears, said—

“She is gone away, and papa says I shall never see my pretty mamma again.”

“When did she go?” I asked.

“She’s gone a long time—over the sea—but she must come back again—my mamma would never go without kissing Rupert.”

“Is your name Rupert?” I inquired, gently smoothing the golden head.

“Yes,” said the little fellow, “I am Rupert, and I don’t believe mamma has gone and left me —and” (he put his little face to my ear and whispered) “I shall wait until nurse goes to sleep again to-night, and then I shall go and look in all the rooms in the house, and find mamma; but please don’t tell nurse—she won’t let me go—so please don’t tell her. I don’t b’lieve mamma’s gone—I don’t b’lieve she is.” And he laid his golden head in my lap, and his little frame shook with the violence of his grief. It was more than he could bear, I thought; and he soon lay quite exhausted. I noticed the transparency of his delicate little hands, every vein of which was visible.

He was breaking his little heart, shut up in that gloomy old house alone; alone—save an old woman for his sole companion, who went away at times, leaving him

there to wear out his little life, fretting for a mother, who came not at his call.

I soothed him as best I could, and then tried to persuade him to go with me into the picture gallery, wishing to divert his thoughts from his trouble for a little while.

"No, no," he said, "mamma will not find me if I go away. She will come to look for me here, and I must not go away."

I stayed with him until nearly dusk, and promised to take him a bird and a kitten to have for his own ; and seeing he was almost asleep, I laid him down upon the blue velvet couch, and he soon fell into a deep sleep. I turned to have a last look at him as he lay, and thought I had never seen a fairer picture. His cheeks were flushed with a bright rose tint, and his golden hair lay scattered over the velvet of the cushion on which his head rested, and

his little transparent hands were tightly clasped together across his chest. Round his eyes great dark rings showed themselves, telling of the sorrow of that childish heart. And so I left him, fast asleep.





CHAPTER XX.

THE NURSE'S STORY.

BELLA and Edmund returned late in the evening, and as she seemed very much fatigued, I thought I would put off telling them of my discovery until the morning. I decided it would be the best plan for me to follow, for if she knew of the little fellow's existence, she could perhaps visit him at times, and lighten his dreary life in a hundred different ways.

I had very little sleep, for I could not forget his pale little face and sorrowful cry. What a desolate life he led, shut up

alone, without any congenial companions to cheer and amuse him, and no father or mother to listen to his little prattling tongue, or to minister to his wants in any way. Once I awoke up with a start, for I imagined I heard him calling me, but it was only imagination. My mind was upset, and it was long before I got to sleep again.

I went upstairs with Bella's usual cup of tea the following morning—the succeeding one to that evening on which I made little Rupert's acquaintance, and to my surprise, she was already in her dressing gown, and disposed for a long chat.

I at once launched forth in explaining to her what I had discovered the afternoon before, and very much astounded she was.

I first told her of the mysterious sobbing I had heard in the gallery, and which we had no doubt, proceeded from poor Rupert's

over-burdened little bosom. I went on to tell her of my finding of the secret door, and of my visit to the part of the house supposed to be uninhabited, and waiting for repairs.

“That was Mr. Layton’s story,” said Bella, “and if you will wait while I finish dressing, I will go with you and see this poor child myself, and hear what his nurse has to say upon the subject.

“To think that we have been here the last three months, and never to have found out that poor child. I feel quite cross with myself, Dora, that you should have been the first to discover all this mysterious and incomprehensible work, actually going on under this roof. Suppose the child dies! but it is too dreadful to contemplate. We will say nothing to Edmund at present,” she went on, “but now let us go down to breakfast, and directly it is finished, and

Edmund out of the way, we'll go and see little Rupert," and linking her arm in mine, as of old she often did, we went down the wide handsome staircase together.

Breakfast over, Bella and I at once made our way to the picture gallery, and finding the secret door, we went on until we arrived at the second door, covered with cloth, and which I have before described to my readers.

The morning was very fine and warm, and the passages through which we had just passed were close and stifling.

Bella clung to my arm when we reached the last door, and I could see she was trembling.

"How courageous you are, Dora," she whispered, "to venture here alone. I declare I feel quite nervous. I should never have dared to come alone. How far are we from the poor boy now?"

"Close to," I answered, and as I spoke, we heard someone singing within, but could not distinguish the words of the song.

We stood still a second or two, listening outside the door, but suddenly the singing ceased, when, throwing open the door, we both entered the room. And this is what we saw:—

Standing in the middle of the room was a tall, angular woman, of middle age. She started violently when she caught sight of us, and inquired our business in a shrill, cracked, unpleasant voice; but there was nothing objectionable in her way of addressing her unwelcome visitors, for I thought she did not look particularly pleased to see us, and she again repeated her former inquiry, but I will give it in her own words.

"An' what do you please to want, ladies?" she inquired. "My orders were

to admit no one to these rooms," she resumed, doggedly.

"We only came to see Master Rupert," I said, as gently as I could, for Bella had seated herself, and did nothing but look about her in amazement at the elegance of the room we were in, and at the woman's strange appearance.

She evidently belonged to some religious order, for she was dressed entirely in black, with a huge white cap upon her head, and a tightly drawn linen band across her wrinkled forehead ; white collar, cuffs, and apron completed her dress.

When I had told her the object of our visit, she stood still some time, as if considering what was the best thing to do, and after looking at us very intently, she said,

"Well, ye can see the young gentleman, but if anything happens ye musn't blame me."

Not pausing to think what she could mean by her strange words, we followed her into the inner room. She went in first, and carefully closed the door after us, and bolted it.

Rupert heard us approaching, and came hastily forward to see who his visitors were. . He recognized me immediately, but after looking earnestly at Bella for a moment, he turned away from her, and murmured, as if to himself, "No, no, that is not my mamma."

I went up to him, and taking his hand, tried to get him to talk to me, but he only shook his pretty head in answer to my entreaties that he should go with us and see the horses and dogs.

“I must wait here for mamma.” And that was all he would say.

Bella had brought some oranges with her for him, he seemed pleased and thanked

her. Just then a travelling organ-grinder stopped near the house in the road, and the sound of the music came floating on the air through the open window, and I noticed how still the child stood until it had ceased.

“ Did you like it, dear ?” I asked.

“ It’s beautiful !” he replied, looking eagerly up into my face. “ Do the angels play like that ?”

I told him their music was better than that, and taking his hand in mine, we walked over to where Bella was standing.

“ Where is that child’s mother ?” she asked the nurse.

“ Gone away, mem,” answered that person, shortly.

“ But will she not return,” I asked, “ to her boy ?”

“ He’ll never see her again in this world,” said the woman in a whisper,

“and maybe his papa will never set eyes on him again.”

“It seems very strange,” I said, “for the poor child to be left alone here, shut up from every pleasure, and nothing left for him to do but break his little heart.”

“Ah, Miss, it’s a long story, and a sad one, too,” returned the nurse, “but I don’t know whether or no I ought to tell it ye. If I do tell it ye, promise me not to let Master Rupert know a word of what I say, as it concerns him, in a manner.”

We gave the required promise, and the woman suggested that we should go into another room, and leave Master Rupert with his oranges for a short time.

We seated ourselves, and after the nurse had secured the door she began her narration as follows:—

“I suppose you ladies live in the other part of the house, my master told me he

had some friends staying in the house, but commanded me not to allow Master Rupert to be seen, and also not to be seen myself; and I knew by that, he hadn't told his friends of our being here."

She paused to listen at the door of the room where little Rupert was, and not hearing any sound, she sat down and went on with her story.

"I have been in Mr. Layton's family for fifty years," she continued, "and now I am left in charge of his only child, and was nurse to Master Rupert's papa. He was the favourite son of the old squire, and being the oldest, got the bulk of his money, for the Layton's are a very wealthy family, as well as a very old one.

"Master Rupert's papa was away travelling until he came of age, and when he was twenty-three he went on the grand tour. Somewhere he met a very lovely

young lady ; she was of gentle birth, I have heard, and he brought her home as his wife.

“Well-a-day ! what a fuss there was to be sure when they got home. Bonfires were burned, and open house was kept for a month.

“No one knew the lady in England, and no one dared ask any questions, and nothing was good enough for her that could be bought for money, in my young master’s eyes. He worshipped her, everyone could see ; and she used to order him about, here and there, like a servant instead of a husband. And he so fond of her, too. Many shook their heads, for she never loved her husband, but only wanted his money to squander. And she was always riding out with the master’s cousin, Sir Geoffrey Linder.

“I used often to look at my master in

those days, and I knew he did not approve of such goings on, but he had a fine spirit, and he would not believe that the wife in whom he placed implicit trust could ever be guilty of any act that would bring disgrace upon the old family name.

“Some said she was Spanish, and others that she was a French lady, but no one knew where she came from, with the exception of herself and husband.”

“Was she fair?” inquired Bella.

“Yes, Madam, she was fair as a lily, and had beautiful blue eyes, and a lovely neck and shoulders, as everyone could see, for she was a very vain woman, and fond of being admired.”

“But how about the child?” I asked.

“I’m coming to that,” said the nurse, and went on with her story in her own way—

“I was telling you about my mistress’s

beauty. She was the loveliest woman I ever saw; and Sir Geoffrey thought so too, for he was for ever dangling about at her heels; and at last some one saw her meet him in the beech walk, and went and told my master that his lady was out in the beech walk with Sir Geoffrey.

“Well, the master went, and saw them walking about, and the gentleman’s arm was round my mistress’s waist. All that my master saw, and he flew into a terrible passion, and told Sir Geoffrey that if he ventured to come near the house again he would shoot him down like a dog.

“Sir Geoffrey was at heart a coward, and the following morning he left early, and everything seemed to be quiet again. But it was only on the surface that quietness reigned, for it soon became known that my mistress would shortly become a mother, and a great fuss was made, for

everyone hoped the coming child would be a son and heir.

“ A boy was born—Master Rupert there—and before he was quite seven years old, his mamma ran away and left him, caring not whether he lived or died ; and then I took entire charge of him. But she did not go away alone, for my master’s own cousin, Sir Geoffrey Linder, accompanied her in her flight ; and then it came out that they had been corresponding with each other all the time ; and from the day my mistress left her home, my poor master has become quite a changed man, and he never notices Master Rupert ; I never yet saw him kiss the child, and I believe he hates the sight of him.

“ He’s away travelling now, and has left his boy in my care, and he pays me well for looking after him ; but it goes to my heart to hear him at night, crying

and calling out for his pretty mamma to come and kiss him. I think the child won't live long, he's a nasty hacking cough upon him, and pines night and day for his mother.

“ My master's orders were very strict. He forbade my taking Master Rupert out, but I don't think I should be erring in my duty towards my master if I allowed the child to go out in the garden for an hour each day, now that you ladies have found him out. I fancy his papa did not wish any one to know of his being here, and that must be his reason for objecting to his going out to play sometimes, but it's not natural for any child to live always indoors.”

We begged of her to bring him down sometimes, and she promised to do so, but added—“ Please don't let my master know—he would be very angry if he thought

I'd disobeyed his commands. I lost Master Rupert, one night," she went on, " he got out of bed, in his sleep, I suppose—and very much frightened I was when I woke up and found he was not in his bed, and was just going to search for him, when I saw him coming in his little white night-gown. I did not speak, for he looked so strange, his eyes were wide open, and he never made a sound, but went and got into bed, and laid down as if he'd known what he was doing, but all the time I felt certain he was asleep. The next morning I found his clothes had been carried into the sitting-room, and I have since thought that he must have dressed himself in his sleep and been out in the passages, for the doors were open, and I know I shut them all myself before going to bed. Perhaps he'd been looking for his mamma," she continued, " but poor lamb, he'll never

see her again in this world, that's my belief."

"Is there a portrait of Master Rupert in the picture gallery?" inquired Bella.

"No, madam, that is a portrait of a cousin of his papa's, taken many years ago, but Master Rupert is the image of him, they are like twins," said the talkative old woman, "and now if ye please, I'll go and see what my young master's after, and perhaps if ye don't mind the trouble, ye'll be coming to see him again before long."

We assured her we would soon come again, and after a last peep at Rupert, who was lying on his sofa, we made our way through the deserted rooms, into that part of the house we occupied, very much impressed by the nurse's story.





CHAPTER XXI.

I RETURN HOME.

IN the evening, when Edmund came home, we told him of the discovery we had made, and also all we had been told by the nurse. He was very much surprised at what we had to relate, and announced his intention of going up to see Rupert as soon as dinner was over.

“That is Layton’s secret trouble then,” he said abruptly, during the meal, “no wonder he seems low-spirited and depressed always.”

“What would become of me, if my wife

were to run away and leave me ?” looking fondly at Bella, as he spoke.

“ She will never run away,” said that young lady ; “ and I’ve promised Dora that I will go and stay with her in August,” she went on gaily.

“ When there will be three of us instead of two, eh, Bella ?” said my brother, slyly.

Bella blushed a rosy red, and playfully boxed her husband’s ears, an infliction, I thought, he would not object to having repeated.

I half envied them their happiness, it seemed so perfect ; one never did anything or went anywhere without first consulting the other ; but such happiness was not for me, it could never be mine, and I must go on my way alone. Hard and bitter was the thought, that each succeeding year could bring no change for me. These thoughts had not troubled me so much of

late, for I had had other scenes to abstract me, and take possession of my mind. Now that my visit was fast drawing to an end my loneliness oppressed me, and I pictured myself alone at my meals, alone in my walks—always alone. No one to welcome me. Nay, I am wrong there, Mrs. Wardle, and old Thomas, I knew would be glad to have me home, but I craved something more than their welcome, hearty though I knew it would be.

Then there were my “poor” in the village, my pony, and other pets, and I tried to look more cheerfully into my future, and resolved to try and live a useful life, though my heart ached in the endeavour.

During the last week of my stay at Fordhan, Bella and I went every day to visit the poor little captive in the west wing, and the second evening before my departure found

me sitting with poor little Rupert on my lap, bathing his head and little thin hands with cold water.

He had been taken suddenly ill—a kind of fit, the nurse said—and he would lie for hours in a semi-conscious state. His appetite was gone, and his little voice grew fainter each day, as it went by.

The doctor was puzzled—Edmund had insisted upon sending for him as soon as he knew Rupert was ill—and he told us that unless a very great change took place, the poor little fellow would not live many days.

He seemed refreshed with the bathing, and slowly turning his golden head, he looked up into my face and whispered—

“Is my mamma in heaven? I do hope she is” he went on, without waiting for my reply ; and I was thankful he did not wait for an answer, for how could I have replied

to that question from his pretty, innocent lips.

Suddenly a gleam of sunshine streamed into the room, he saw it, and pointing with his little finger, said, "Musn't it be beautiful where that comes from?"

"Yes," I made answer, "it is beautiful up there—but don't you want to go to sleep?"

"No, thank you," said the child, simply, "will you come up there, where it is beautiful?"

"Yes, I hope so," I answered, as steadily as I could, for I could not help the tears coming into my eyes as I listened to the child, so soon to be taken away, and whose short life had been filled with so much sorrow—sorrow which had proved too much for his delicate frame, and which was slowly, but surely sapping his little life away.

He lay some time watching that gleam of sunshine, and at last fell into a deep sleep. I laid him on his little bed, and went to my room, where I relieved my overwrought feelings by having a good cry. After a time I washed my face, and found my way into the drawing-room, where Edmund and Bella were seated. I related my conversation with little Rupert, and expressed to them my belief that he could not live many days longer.

Edmund seemed very much shocked as he listened, and then, after walking round the room several times, as if in deep thought, he said—

“I don’t know where Layton is, or I’d telegraph to him. It’s a very sad affair for the child to die here alone, and his only near relatives too far away to summon in case anything should happen. It is the saddest thing I ever knew. Poor little

fellow, how he must have loved his mother; his heart is broken. I think she could'nt have been altogether bad, if she was capable of making an innocent child like Rupert love her so fondly. I'll go up and see him." And so saying, my brother left the room.

"Does no one know Mr. Layton's address?" I asked Bella.

"No," she replied; "the last Edmund heard of him was that he was just starting for India; and that was months ago."

"Who are his lawyers?" I next inquired.

"I thought of finding out his whereabouts through them," she answered, "but Edmund could not find out who they were, so we can do nothing but hope for the best. The child is too weak to move, or the doctor would take him to his own home, for there he would have companions

of his own age to play with, and their society would do him more good than medicine."

And this is how matters stood when I took my departure from the Manor House.

I arrived at Trenthaven station about four in the afternoon, and old Thomas met me on the platform, with a face wreathed in smiles; and it was not very long before I found myself in my comfortable little sitting-room, listening to Mrs. Wardle's account of all that had been going on in my absence.

I found several letters awaiting me—one arrived the day I left for Fordhan—but my correspondence was of so little importance, that I did not think it necessary to have any letters forwarded to me.

One contained an invitation from my Aunt Carrie. "Do come and stay with me," she wrote; "I am so anxious to see

you again, and to have you with me for a time. I am quite alone, but there is plenty of cheerful society in the neighbourhood, and I have many young friends who would be glad to make your acquaintance." And so the letter ran on.

I answered it at once, warmly thanking my Aunt for her kindness in thinking of me, but at the same time telling her that I must remain at home until after Bella's visit; and I did not hear again from her for some time, and I began to think I had offended her with declining her invitation too abruptly.

The dear old Vicar had died while I was away, Mrs. Wardle told me; and very much grieved I was when she told me that he died quite suddenly, returning from baptizing a dying child—died in his carriage, and the coachman nearly died too, from fright, when he opened the carriage door and

found his master leaning back quite dead. The good old soul sobbed again as she related these facts to me ; and she was not the only one who shed tears, for the good old man was loved by all, and especially by the poor in the parish. His labours for their good had been incessant, and he would be missed in every home in the village.

I, too, should miss his kindly voice, and ever welcoming fatherly smile. And then my thoughts rambled on, and I began to wonder who our new Vicar would be, and if he would find his way to the people's hearts, as the old man, now gone for ever, had done—always ready to sacrifice his own comfort and ease if he could benefit anyone else ; never studying self. But who the new Vicar was, I must inform my readers in the succeeding chapter.



CHAPTER XXII.

THE NEW VICAR.

I HAD been home about a fortnight; and now that the little excitement occasioned by my return was over, everything drifted on in its monotonously quiet way. One day was as another to me, and I began to grow weary of it all, and to long for a change of things. But now there was a little excitement among the villagers, for the new Vicar was coming, and he was to preach for the first time on Sunday, the first of July.

I confess I felt rather anxious myself, to

know who he could be, for as yet no one seemed to know.

It was Saturday, the last day in June, and I, feeling dull, thought I would go for a walk in the park before my early dinner, and call and see Mrs. Monkton, who still lived at the lodge, and was a hale, hearty old woman of nearly fourscore years. She was alone; her husband had died nearly two months ago, and she felt his loss deeply. I tried to comfort her, and partially succeeded, and by degrees drew her on to talk upon other subjects than the one uppermost in her mind.

“ Ah, Miss Dora,” she said, as I was leaving, “ you are looking very wan yourself; don’t you get laid up ill, and leave us.”

I left her standing at the pretty lodge gate, and tried to smile cheerfully as I bade her farewell; but when I was out of

her sight the tears gushed forth, and I gave relief to my feelings in a good cry.

If I should be laid up, and die, who would care, I asked myself. Life had no joys for me, and death at that time would not have been unwelcome to me.

The next day was Sunday, and the weather was lovely. When I got to church I was surprised to see every pew full to over-crowding; then I remembered that the new Vicar was to preach for the first time that morning.

Hardy farmers were there, with their rosy-cheeked wives and daughters, some of whom had walked six miles there, and would have the same distance to walk after the service was over.

Most of the people sat with their eyes directed towards the vestry door, eager to catch the first glimpse of their new Vicar.

Presently the organ pealed forth, and the choir, in fresh washed surplices, came slowly up the aisle, followed by the new Vicar. Every head went round as he appeared, and I was amazed to see in our new Vicar one whom I had known for a long time, and whose face was the last I saw as I got into the train at Fordhan station. Yes, there was no mistake, Alfred Claremont—now the Rev. Alfred Claremont—was our new Vicar.

Henceforth he would be near me, and I should have to meet him in my daily walks, to see him often, and to go on loving him, but not to listen to him declaring his love for me in return ; that I would not do, and I mentally resolved to give him no opportunity of being nearer to me than he now was, and so perhaps in time he would become indifferent towards me, and find one whom he would love ; and he should

never know the anguish it caused me to give him up.

I should hear his voice Sunday after Sunday, that was all ; and so my thoughts rambled on—I could not help it—my eyes rested upon my prayer book, but my thoughts would not fix themselves upon anything but my own sorrowful condition.

I chided myself severely, resolving not to allow my thoughts to wander for the future ; but the service passed on, and I walked wearily home to my solitary dinner, longing for a sympathizing ear in which to pour out my woes.

I did not go to the afternoon service, as I was generally accustomed to do, but spent my afternoon wandering about, and practising some of our beautiful ancient and modern hymns.

Life was very dreary, I told myself over and over again. Some will say

I had plenty of money and a beautiful home, and what more could I want? I wanted a loving heart, some one in whom I could trust, and who would comfort me under the terrible burden I had to bear.

My father's sin was ever before me; and in my sleep, the pale face of my mother appeared to me in my dreams. She smiled upon me, and then I fancied she was pleased with me for keeping her unhappy life a secret from my brother.

In those dark days I often longed for wings to flee away and be at rest; but light was coming to me—my cloud was not without a silver lining.

Our new Vicar had not yet called upon me, and nearly a fortnight had gone by since he made his appearance, as Vicar, at Trenthaven. He was fast getting into favour with the people, I was told; and one old woman I had been long in the

habit of visiting occasionally, said that the new parson's words sank into her soul—like she imagined the words of our Saviour did into the hearts of his apostles. “Ah, he's a good man,” she went on, still speaking of the new Vicar, “an' he's nowt but a young parson to know so much. Them were blessed words I heerd on Sunday, and I mind the toime when he and Master Willie used to go a-ridin' thro' the village, an' always a nod and a smile for us poor old folks ; and little I thought then that I should live to see Master Claremont here in the old Vicar's place. And all the little ones are that fond o' him. He'll soon be a-wanting a wife now to bear him company. Well, well, I hope he will find one worthy o' him.”

I liked to listen to these simple-minded old women, and always preferred the old ones' company to that of the younger ones,

and I was glad to find that the new Vicar was so much liked among the people; and that in welcoming their new pastor, they did not forget the good man who had laboured so many years in their midst; and a handsome stained glass window was placed in the church, at the people's expense, to his memory.





CHAPTER XXIII.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

A MONTH had passed away, and I had not as yet once spoken to Alfred Claremont. I was sitting, one afternoon early in August, in my pleasant little morning room, when I heard a strange voice in the hall asking for me.

I had not long been in from a ramble in the park, and was trying to remember where I had heard that voice before, when the door of the room wherein I was seated was thrown open by Thomas, and in walked Alfred Claremont. I was very

much surprised to see him, though I had been expecting him to call, yet when he did come I was not prepared to receive him.

He advanced towards me, and taking both my hands in his, said—

“Have you no word of welcome for me?”

I recovered myself, and drawing my hands from his firm clasp, said—

“You know I am always pleased to see you,” and moving to the other side of the room, I seated myself as far from him as I possibly could, and glancing up at him, I saw an amused smile round the corners of his mouth, and deliberately coming over to my side of the room, he seated himself on the nearest seat he could find by my side.

How my heart palpitated, I knew that the crisis of my life was approaching.

I sat and trembled so that I could not speak for a moment or two, but this feeling passed away soon, and I became aware instinctively that I was mistress of the situation.

My companion was more nervous than I was, or I mistook his silence for nervousness, and so gained courage to say, "How do you like the vicarage?"

"Very much," he replied, "but it is very dull, living there alone, very dull."

I did not know what to say in reply to this, and again there was an awkward pause.

At last it was broken by my companion coming to my chair, and taking my hand in his.

"Dora," he said, "may I call you Dora? You know that I love you, and now I must know if you can love me in return."

I did love him, but how could I tell him so, with that dreadful secret on my mind ?

“Speak to me, Dora,” he pleaded, “say you love me, and will be my own sweet wife, and you shall never have cause to repent placing your future in my hands.”

I found voice at last to whisper, “I do love you, Alfred,” and without waiting to hear more, he took me in his arms and kissed me, long and fondly.

“You will be my wife, then,” he urged, “my own loving little wife?”

“No,” I said, “I can never be your wife, never, no never.”

“What is there to prevent your marrying me?” he cried, “I shall not give you up. I care for nothing, now I know you love me,” and again he took me in his arms and kissed me on cheeks, lips, and brow.

“Tell me what you mean, dear, by saying you cannot marry me.”

Should I tell him the truth ? would he not loathe me when he knew my secret—that I was the daughter of a murderer and a suicide ? My cup seemed full. I loved him and he loved me ; why tell him anything ? why not marry him, letting him know nothing of my life's sorrow ?

My conscience rebelled against deception of any kind, and I mentally resolved that rather than become his wife, letting him think I was other than what I was, I would tell him my secret, even if he hated me afterwards, yes, even if it should be the cause of turning his love away from me. I could not go to the altar with a secret hidden in my heart, and I prepared myself for the worst, so summoning all my courage, I said, “ What I am now going to disclose to you has been the terrible secret that I have borne alone for more than two years, and before I disclose it to

you, you must promise me never to divulge to any living creature what I am now about to confide to your keeping."

Taking my hand in his own, he gave the required promise, and my breath going and coming in gasps, I began by saying, "Did you know that my father committed suicide? and that through remorse for having, in a fit of passion, taken a fellow-creature's life, and I am a murderer's——" but I could not utter the word, and half fainting, I fell back on my seat. He knelt beside me, and smoothed my hair lovingly with his hand.

"Now," I thought, "when I have disclosed my dreadful secret to him, he will turn away and leave me for ever," and with averted face, I told him all I had gone through since that terrible night in the autumn.

After I had done, neither spoke for some

time, and I began to think I had not thought wrongly, and that he was disgusted with the horrible tale I had disclosed to him, and he would go away, and I should never see him more. Oh! the agony of those few minutes, but I did not repent having told him of my trouble, and by degrees I grew calmer and turned to look at my companion. Our eyes met, and with a glad cry I fell into his outstretched arms.

“Poor darling,” he murmured, “how you must have suffered with that terrible burden on your mind all this time, and not daring to let any one sympathize with you. I can’t help being very much shocked at the tale you have just told me, dear, but it was through no fault of yours; and you are dearer to me for the noble way in which you have obeyed your parents by keeping the knowledge of their sin from the world and your brother; and now, darling, you

must try to forget all you have told me, and be the happy girl you were when first I knew you."

How these words of his comforted me ; now I had found a loving heart, and one in whose sympathizing ear I could 'pour out my woes ; and I cried for very joy.

We talked long and earnestly, " Alfred Claremont (now my betrothed husband) and I agreeing never to allude again in any way to my disclosure of the afternoon—but to bury it down, deep in our two hearts—and there let the horrible secret remain ; and to forget as soon as we could the part I had borne in the hideous past, and with a thankful heart to the Giver of all good things to look forward to a future of happiness and peace !"

Oh ! the rest that crept over me when I had made an end of my sorrowful tale, and found a sympathizing listener, who

turned not away, but who comforted and soothed me with loving words and looks ! My trouble seemed like a dreadful dream of the past, and my future looked bright and lovely before me.

At five, Thomas brought in my afternoon cup of tea, and then my visitor—he who was henceforth to walk through life by my side, and who I knew to be good and true—rose to leave, for he had some parish work to attend to, and so for a short time we parted.

“I shall soon come again, darling,” he said as he was leaving, “for there are many things I want to consult you about, and pressing one long fond kiss upon my lips, he left me. Left me alone with my wonderful happiness, and such a happy time I had that evening, alone with my joy.

Heaven send many such to every one, is the best wish I can offer. It was a lovely evening, and I went out in the grounds for

a walk, just as the shadows of night were creeping round; and as I was returning towards the house, I saw Mrs. Wardle coming up the drive, having a little basket in her hand. I waited to speak to her, and she at once began to explain the errand she had been about. Some one was ill in the village, and she had herself taken them a few good things; and with the freedom of an old and valued servant she began to talk of Edmund and Bella's coming visit. They had now a little son, and the young mother was anxious to display her darling to the admiring eyes of myself and the old housekeeper.

We went into the house, and then Mrs. Wardle said, with the important air of one privileged to make a remark, "I hear the new Vicar is a very popular man, an' he's such a nice gentleman—every one likes him—an' he's a good man, too."

“Yes,” I said, “I think he is a good man,” and I felt my face was betraying my own great happiness to the keen eyes looking, I fancied, rather suspiciously at me.

“Pardon me, Miss Dora,” she said, and then stopped.

“Well, go on with what you were about to remark,” I told her, and nervously twisting her bonnet-strings, she went on—

“Thomas says he heard Mr. Claremont say ‘God bless my Dora,’ as he was letting him out of the hall,” and the dear, simple, old soul was positively crying.

“An’ is it true, you that I’ve nursed in my arms, an’ I shall yet live to see you a happy wife, and maybe with babies of your own for these old arms to carry? An’ I, too, say ‘God bless Miss Dora,’ for she’s been a good young mistress to me in my old age.”

I could not resist the impulse to kiss the good old soul, and told her it was true that I should be married soon, please God, and that the new Vicar would be my husband; and with her face a mixture of smiles and tears, she went out to tell Thomas that the young mistress was really going to be married soon. And falling down on my knees, I thanked God for my great happiness.





CHAPTER XXIV.

"TILL DEATH DO US PART."



WILL not linger over the happy time which followed, for it was a happy time to me.

"The Limes" we decided to retain in the family, and to let it on a lease, just as it was—for I could not bear the thought of parting with my dear old home—so that after I had left it I could still go and look at it sometimes, the vicarage being not very far distant, as I have said before.

It was now nearly the middle of August, and I was hourly expecting to see Edmund and Bella, with their little son, arrive. Such a wonderful child he was, wrote Bella, and could already recognize his papa, though only a few months old.

Alfred came twice a week to "The Limes," and always brought me some little present—books, music—and he had given me a very handsome diamond ring, to wear as my engagement ring, to show, he said, that I belonged to him, and to keep others away. He wished our marriage to take place in November, but it was settled at last that we should be married at Christmas; then he could take a longer holiday, and I should visit some of those wonderful places I had read of, but had never yet seen.

Bella wrote me long accounts of her visits to little Rupert. He lingered on

until the close of July, and then he died; died of a broken heart, and with only strangers to close his little eyes.

His papa was expected back in England the coming spring; but he would have no little son to welcome him home, for long before the snowdrops came again, little neglected, innocent Rupert was a bright angel. No more nightly wanderings for him—wanderings in search of his unnatural mother, of whom he was so fond; no more nights and days of weeping for that tender little blossom, all that was now over, and none knew when that troubled little spirit took its flight. Constant fretting had worn him almost to a skeleton, Bella wrote, and he sunk into a rapid decline.

I could not refrain from weeping when I read the sorrowful details. I had often thought he was too fair for this world, and his little life had known none of the joys

experienced by many children, but now his troubles were over, and when his father should call for his son, there would be none to answer him.

My visitors had arrived, and their baby was one of the bonniest boys I ever saw. Bella and her little one remained with us the whole of September, and were to stay and spend their Christmas at the old home. The twenty-seventh was fixed for our wedding day.

Edmund had returned to Fordhan early in September, coming over occasionally to have a peep at his treasures. Christmas was now rapidly approaching, and he would not be able to leave his parish on Christmas-day, so we had decided to postpone all festivities until after it was over, and he was to arrive on the night of the twenty-sixth, to be in readiness for the morrow's ceremony. Edmund was to give

me away, and an old friend of Alfred's was to officiate in that ceremony that was to make us two "one."

We were very busy moving my treasures from The Limes to the Vicarage. I wished to keep round me in my new home all those little mementos of my parents, now in their graves, that I had been accustomed to have about me in the home of my childhood. My piano, the study furniture, and the pictures, were removed to the Vicarage, at Edmund's express desire ; for the house and its contents were to be divided between the two of us. The house for one, and the furniture, plate, pictures, and everything movable, for the other. So my father willed it ; and we were contented, either way.

It was the evening of the twenty-sixth of December, all our friends had arrived, and the morrow would be my wedding-day.

That night, after all had retired, I sat long and late, watching the moon in the clear sky ; my thoughts were very happy ones, and it was not until I began to get chilled with the night air, that I remembered it was now midnight ; there was I sitting by my chamber window, and if I wished to look well on the morrow, I had better get to sleep at once ; so accordingly I did get to sleep, and did not wake until late on my wedding-morn.

Aunt Carrie came soon after, to see if I was awake ; and I felt grateful to her for the motherly way in which she gave me a “good morning” kiss, and asking God’s blessing, wished me much happiness.

A few hours later, and I was standing dressed as a bride, with dear Bella’s hands putting the last finishing touches to my toilet ; and then my two bridesmaids came in, to see and be seen.

My dress was of rich white satin, and hung in shining folds around me. Aunt Carrie placed the beautiful wreath of orange-blossoms upon my head, and gave a little pinch here and there to my dress, as a final ending to the ceremony of dressing the bride ; and I stood arrayed for the altar.

My bridesmaids were dressed in blue ; soft white swan's-down tippets covered their shoulders, for the season was very mild for the time of the year, but still it was cold, and aunt insisted upon wrapping us all well up, so as to prevent our taking cold on this my wedding-day.

Myself and my two bridesmaids had breakfasted in my dressing room ; and a happy party we were, assembled in that snug little room. At last it was time to go down stairs ; the carriages came round, and we drove to church.

It was but a short drive through the pretty country road, and soon we reached the little ivy-covered church, which was crowded with spectators, to see the wedding party ; the villagers and school children flocking outside to catch a glimpse of the bride. After some little fuss and confusion, I found myself in front of the altar, and he whom I so loved was standing by my side. It seemed like a dream, that I, who a short time ago had thought there was no happiness left for me, was now being united to one who had loved me since the first day we met. But I was aroused from these thoughts, which went flashing through my mind, by seeing the clergyman approaching ; and soon our vows were uttered which made us man and wife. The organ then pealed forth, and soon we were again seated in the carriage, and being whirled off to the home I was

now leaving for that of a husband's, with whom my life would henceforth be passed, and whom I had just sworn to love and cherish till death should us part.

Then followed the breakfast, of which I have a very faint remembrance; and it was not long before we were in the train, speeding away towards London, *en route* for the Continent.

My story is now nearly ended, and I have little more to add. Eleven happy years have passed since my wedding-day, and four happy little faces are smiling up at me as I end this, the story of my life.

God has been good to me in these latter years of my life, and has showered down bountiful blessings upon me and mine.

I, whose early life was so dark and clouded have now many things to be thankful for; and one is, that when I prayed so earnestly for death in those

dark days, the Lord did not grant my prayer, for had he done so I should never have been the mother of these four little darlings, and the wife of one of the best of husbands. And I now feel that "whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth."

THE END.

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